
'Moveo Ergo Sum': Mobility as Vital to Humanity and its (Self-)Image

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Setting the Scene

Human mobility—a complex assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experience (cf. Cresswell, 2006)—is not only popular among those who talk about a “mobility turn” in social theory and who have proposed a “new mobilities paradigm” to reorient the ways in which scholars think about society (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Influential theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai, Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, and Zygmunt Bauman all conceptualize contemporary capitalism and globalization in terms of increasing numbers and varieties of mobility: the fluid, continuous (but not always seamless) movement of people, ideas, and goods through and across space. Many contemporary scholars valorize, if not romanticize, ideas of travel and mobility (Bude & Dürrschmidt, 2010). Mobility can thus be described as a key social process, “a relationship through which the world is lived and understood” (Adey, 2010).

Indeed, the human being is, first of all, a “moving being” (Farnell, 2012). People have always been on the move, for a variety of reasons, from subsistence to experience, from necessity to privilege (Amato, 2004; Gotaas, 2009). Granting that the act of moving is a universal trait, the particular ways in which humans move, and the processes of identity and belonging attached to these movements, are strongly linked to sociocultural factors (Bergmann & Sager, 2008; Casimir & Rao, 1992). Basic self-powered forms of human locomotion such as walking, running or dancing are deeply embodied practices (Mauss, 1973[1935]), drawing attention to the (physical) self (Lund, 2012; Wylie, 2005). Our body-in-motion is also the medium for knowing the world (Ilundáin-Agurruza, 2014), enriching us cognitively and existentially (Ingold, 2010, p. 18). Through our feet, we are ‘in touch’ with our surroundings (Ingold, 2004), allowing for sensual experiences of place (Edensor, 2000). In other words, self-propelled movements such as walking and running are one of the most fundamental modes of ‘belonging’ in the world (Heidegger, 1996[1929]; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010). As we move through space and time, we become our movement (*moveo ergo sum*), phenomenologically and in terms of identity and social position (Austin, 2007; Ingold, 2011). The physical act of moving thus captures a certain attitude to life as “becoming” or “potential” (Manning,

2009). The idea of “becoming through mobility” (*moveo ergo sum*) is part of the perceived shift from inherited or acquired identities to a focus on identification, a change from relatively stable (place-based) identities to hybrid (achieved) identities characterized by flux. In motion philosophy, becoming is conceived as a process of emergence, transition, and change (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

The “primacy of movement,” as a philosophy of becoming, was articulated long ago (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). Pre-Socratic scholars already distinguished between movement as change in location (*kinesis*) and transformation (*métabolè*), the process through which something becomes something else (Laplantine, 2015). Since then, people have connected the two, arguing that physical journeys, of which wandering pilgrimages function as an archetype (Coleman & Eade, 2004), act as opportunities to transform the self (Lean, Staiff, & Waterton, 2014). Locomotion, mostly in the form of walking, running or dancing, has also played a significant role in traditional rites of passage across cultures (e.g. “walking towards adulthood”) (Nabokov, 1981). The lived experiences and attributed values linked to physical movement are important ways by which people express their adaptation to, and understanding of, periods of personal, social, or environmental change. This is illustrated by the many etymological and historical links between concepts for travel, transition, and experience (Lean, 2016). Moreover, as an expression of the human will to explore, interact with, and ultimately transcend the limits of the physical environment, corporeal movement is considered to be deeply embedded in the formation and continuing transformation of societies and cultures across the globe (Leed, 1991).

Moving, and thinking and feeling with and through movement, is foundational to being human, to being a dynamically embodied and emplaced person (Farnell, 2012). Despite, or perhaps because of, its omnipresence in life, the physical practice of locomotion is rarely analyzed on its own terms, as a distinct category of scholarly investigation. Existing research in the social sciences and humanities ranges from analyses of individual “body motions” (Mauss, 1973[1935]) to broad (and often abstract) investigations of “moving bodies” in the context of migration, tourism, or other forms of travel (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller, 2013). Mobility studies have theorized how people move around by looking at social phenomena through the lens of movement (Adey, et al., 2013; Endres, Manderscheid, & Mincke, 2016; Urry, 2007). Most of these studies, however, reveal very little about the dynamic embodied and emplaced experiences of the act of moving itself. In refugee and migration studies, for instance, the endurance journey that many people have to undertake, as “a profoundly formative and transformative experience” (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014, p. 297), often involving immense personal and social upheaval, is significantly under-researched (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014).

Nomadic societies and agricultural peoples alike had physically active and mobile routines (Devine, 1985). The development of sedentary lifestyles, and the subsequent depreciation of self-propelled movement by the wealthier segments of society (associating it with poverty and vagrancy), is related to processes of industrialization and modernization. However, an increasing

number of people started reporting to be living in “overdrive,” in a state of excessive activity (not necessarily physical) and speed (Aldrich, 2005). This is linked to the ideology of capitalism, which is concerned with efficient production, and because of technological developments, which facilitated this surge in rhythm to occur. In reaction to this, people began yearning for a slower pace of life, closely related to nostalgia for an idealized and romanticized “slower” pre-modern past, with an emphasis on “authentic” experience (over external rewards) and the sensuous human body (Gros, 2014; Solnit, 2000).

Self-conscious, recreational forms of (slow) locomotion grew in the industrialized centers of the 19th century, with the emergence of middle classes who had the requisite free time and resources (Scheerder & Breedveld, 2015). Recreational mobilities became very popular and started democratizing worldwide in the 1970s, closely connected to the renewed societal attention to fitness and health (Berg, 2015). Today, such locomotion, in all its varieties, is routinely integrated into many people’s lifestyles, as “a way of being” instead of “a means of travel” (Urry, 2007, p. 79). However, although increasingly popular, the idea of walking, running, or dancing as recreational physical activities is far from universally accepted across cultures and societies. Recreation refers here both to “create anew, restore, refresh” (*recreate*) and to “restoration to health” (*recreatio*). Some people engage in recreational walking, running, or dancing motivated by the utilitarian values commonly associated with them—as “body maintenance” activities to lose weight, to keep fit or healthy, or to look good (Featherstone, 1982). However, many also perceive their enduring mobilities (in the sense of deeply lived experience as well as imagined connectedness to the past) as having intrinsic value.

Imaginaries, as socially shared patterns of meaning rather than as private cognition, can both endorse the normality or historicity of stasis or of mobilities (Salazar & Glick Schiller, 2014). This points to the controlling role of mobility imaginaries (cf. Castoriadis, 1987; Taylor, 2004). I conceptualize imaginaries as socially shared and transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices (Salazar, 2011). Empowered by mass-mediated images and discourses, imaginaries circulate globally and change the way in which people collectively envision the world and their place and mobility within it. Imaginaries travel through a multitude of channels, including people.

In a sense, dedicated walkers, runners, or dancers engage, not unlike the romanticized and aestheticized image of pre-modern wandering pilgrims, in quest-like activities that require stamina as well as emotional strength (‘no pain, no gain’) to reach uplifting experiential and existential “authenticity.” They devote themselves both to moments of effort and self-mastery, and to a way of life that involves passion, pain, sacrifice, faith, and addiction (Koski, 2015). In the process, they can create both ephemeral and more permanent (quasi-subcultural) “communities” of practitioners and supporters. Resisting suffering becomes part of a search for deeper meaning, a validation of the self and lived experience (Le Breton, 2012). Pain reminds people of the erratic capacities of their body (Scott, Cayla, & Cova, 2017), facilitating (meta)physical rediscovery and spiritual elevation

(Glucklich, 2001). The link between physical activity and “spirituality,” broadly defined, has often been made (Humberstone, 2011).

Because locomotion can involve long periods of monotonous rhythmic activity (Edensor, 2010; Lefebvre, 2004), and a large degree of contact with the (natural) environment, it can be a means of achieving a meditative-like state, allowing for a sense of deeper connection and awareness. “The end result may be excitement of the psyche, but the starting point is visceral. The change of register cannot be brought about unless it starts in the very depths of the organism” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p. 284). The experiences reported are often aesthetic in nature (Tainio, 2012). The encountered pleasurable, euphoric state (biochemically related to the release of endorphins) cannot always be articulated. In the literature, it has been variously described as “flow,” “peak experience,” “runners’ (or walkers’) high,” and “the zone” (Annerino, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Parry, Nesti, Robinson, & Watson, 2007; Sheehan, 1978; Stevens, 1988). This state is linked to spirituality in the sense that people experience a meaningful (re)connection to themselves, to others, to the environment or to the transcendent. The conscious process of searching this embodied experience (Csordas, 1994) in locomotion resembles a wandering ascetic pilgrimage, a quest (by means of a bodily experience) in search of something, a journey toward a goal, if only one’s own transformation (Bratton, 2012), or the accumulation of “existential capital” (Nettleton, 2013). Pilgrimage, a reconnecting journey of endurance, suffering and sacrifice (sometimes only symbolically) is, at its core, a “kinetic ritual” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. xiii). Sociocultural frameworks deeply influence the interpretation of this condition (Bridel, Markula, & Denison, 2016).

Running P(e)acefully

The “pace of life” commonly refers to the relative flow or movement of time that people experience (Levine, 1997). Pace is made meaningful through practices, discourses, and representational strategies that imbue it with ideological significance (Molz, 2009). Consequently, it is a multiple and heterogeneous concept, varying both within and between groups and individuals, and according to social position. Assumptions and theories about the pace of life speeding up abound in contemporary social theory. Some scholars have made explicit links between the experience of time pressure and accelerating mobility. Hartmut Rosa (2013), for example, develops the concept of “social acceleration,” ascribing an accelerated pace of life and frequent time scarcity to technological and socio-economic advancement. The continuous tension between interior (personal) rhythms and social rhythms is identified as the distinctive sign of this form of acceleration.

The desire to slow down the pace of life, thereby equating the good life with the slow life, increasingly features in studies of happiness and well-being. In this context, it is good to remember that the experience and value of slowness was historically derived from, and articulated through, notions of speed (in both time and movement) (Parkins, 2004). John Urry, for instance, noted how

“The diversity of modes of transport increasingly enabled people to compare and contrast different forms of mobility” (2000, p. 54). As a result, earlier forms of transport such as walking became romanticized and aestheticized.

Most people associate the word “pacemaker” with the medical device that stimulates cardiac impulses and regulates heart muscle contractions. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) work on “rhythmanalysis” (the study of the rhythms of urban spaces and their effects on people), Don Parkes and Nigel Thrift applied the term pacemaker, “an entity controlling or influencing rhythmic activity” (1980, p. 20), to urban contexts. In their view, the relevance of urban pacemakers – regions or points in space, durations or instants in time or relations in space and time that are sources of timing (e.g. city lights) – is high because they change the characteristics of places (and, consequently, people’s relations to them).

In a similar vein, I am focusing in my own research on the role of human pacemakers. In running practice, a pacemaker denotes a seasoned runner who helps other runners to run an optimal race by setting the pace. While in the past only frontrunners had pacemakers (usually running only part of the race), it has become customary at big races to provide a whole team of pacemakers, each running at a different pace so that followers may reach the finish line in a timely manner. In running lingo, pace is always comparative, indicating how fast you are running in comparison with others during the same race. In long-distance and ultra-long-distance running, however, pace has quite a different meaning.

After all, running is an embodied practice with specific rhythmic qualities (You, 1994), a mode of experiencing place. The way we “run” different places varies in purpose, pace, and rhythm. The most popular running settings are “green environments” (Howe & Morris, 2009; Lund, 2012; Qviström, 2016), preferably remote areas of natural beauty, with mountainous regions having a special attraction. Running in such environments can be experienced to distance oneself from the busyness of everyday life, through an encounter with a different temporality. Breathing is perhaps one of the most externally noticeable ways that the body reacts to pace and place. Respiration is one way in which place “invades” and affects the body. Enjoying “the fresh air” of a natural environment is an aspect that runners mention repeatedly because they literally “breathe in” place. The expression “breathing space” is of course also a figurative way to refer to a place where one can relax from the pressures and demands on one’s time that are associated with everyday life.

Endurance activities such as long-distance running are praised for the additional advantage of identity-making, predicated on qualities like achievement, exceptionalism, triumph of the will, and moral redemption. Exercising in nature (or made-natural environments) is believed to make people tough enough to keep “progress” on the march, “making the specific kind of self-sufficient, risk-managing bodies and selves the neoliberal political, economic and cultural formations [require]” (Barnes, 2009, p. 239). Mainstream popular culture, arts. and (social) media representations often tend to represent endurance practitioners as model individuals in contemporary society: “dedicated, controlled, disciplined, culturally and economically invested in health and self-responsible”

(Shipway & Holloway, 2010, p. 275). Continually feeling pressured to prove themselves in a society where role models are both countless and contradictory, endurance runners seek to test their strength of character, bravery, and personal resources (Le Breton, 2000). In other words, long-distance walkers and runners can be thought of as symbolical “pacemakers,” people who set standards of performance and achievement (efficiency and success) for others.

The desired “synchronization” of the rhythms of the body and the environment can also go wrong (Edensor & Larsen, 2017). Taking things too seriously (e.g. heavy training) and the overdependence on technological gadgets (e.g. GPS watches, heart rate monitors and foot pods) has the risk of reducing, if not eliminating, the anticipated experience. The fixation on “healthy food” (Oxlund, 2012) or the, sometimes compulsive, online sharing of endurance data (which requires substantial amounts of “immobile” time behind the screen) that can go together with the practice of endurance running hint at other problems (Lupton, 2016). The sacrifices and level of commitment may, in some sense at least, conflict with human flourishing and fulfilment in a broader sense (e.g. maintaining healthy social relations with family and friends), as does the contrast between the slow recreational mobilities during leisure time versus the fast mobilities during other moments (including the transport needed to get to the sought-after remote “green environments”).

Like any other human activity, the practice of endurance running is undergoing constant transformations. Bestselling books such as *Born to Run* (McDougall, 2009) or *Ultramarathon Man* (Karnazes, 2005), documentaries such as *Unbreakable: The Western States 100* (Benna, 2012), and iconic endurance runners such as Kilian Jornet Burgada have made these practices known among the broad public. Endurance running is becoming increasingly popular and the more extreme feats receive wide media attention.

Conclusion

Imaginarities are influential in the sense that they can precede different discourses, power relations, social relations, institutional structures, and material practices of mobility. Studying and questioning these imaginaries of (im)mobility offers a novel way in which to grasp the ongoing global transformations of the human condition. The focus on imaginaries as a major source of relating people across boundaries and borders also effectively challenges basic assumptions of, and the divisions between, previously separated fields of study such as tourism and migration studies. An anthropology of mobility imaginaries reveals how local lifeworlds in global contexts are always negotiated, contested, and constantly under transformation.

No concept of mobility is possible without considering temporal aspects. Slow mobilities are not only a fashionable contemporary way of spending (mostly) leisure time but, more importantly, also a mode of movement that reinforces the traditional connection between travail (physical toil) and (inner) transformation (Salazar, 2018). The development of running as recreational leisure is a nice expression of how values and attitudes towards speed may be changing, or how certain

implicit senses of the appropriate pace of life may be losing ground to new sensibilities and even associated senses of social virtue. The slow lifestyle in general, however, is fraught with the neoliberal contradiction of demanding individual responsibility for how one spends one's time, as if the problem of time was really a matter of lifestyle choice, while advocating for slowness as an attainable public good (Sharma, 2014, p. 128). Not everyone wants to or can have a slower life. Moreover, there is also the view that sees busyness as a sign of full and active participation in modern society – “speeding up,” “being busy,” or “harried” as the main symbolic source of a full and valued life (Darier, 1998).

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