

AUDIO CHRONICLES

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When mobility runs into the wall of immobility

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From the Israeli wall to the Syrian borders, international crises have shown that the ability of governments to prevent mobility is a key means of exercising power and conducting wars. And yet, does mobility always equal freedom?

The author

MIMI SHELLER

Mobility is important today but so too are walls that stop mobility, like the Israeli one, built not just to contain Palestinians but to control their movements. I want to think about such walls in relation to mobilities research. Mobilities research does not claim that all the world is mobile now, nor that we live in a new condition of fluidity. It rejects the turn-of-the-millennium free-market discourse of globalization as a kind of unfettered mobility across a supposedly flat world. We remember that the colonial world economy has long entailed extensive global mobilities, while the exercise of power often depends on stopping the mobility of others.

So we are concerned with things like friction, turbulence, immobility and stillness, and how these are produced and represented in relation to mobilities. Mobilities research in its broadest sense concerns not only physical movement but also potential movement, blocked movement, immobilization and forms of dwelling and place-making. Also important are the in-between and liminal places at which movement is paused, slowed or stopped. That means we look at borders, airports, toll roads, hotels and motels, as well as

detention centres and refugee camps.

The control of mobility is a key feature of governance and state-making, and therefore also of wars. So it is not a question of privileging a mobile or nomadic subject, but rather of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating the effects of both movement and staying still. Mobility does not always equal freedom. We have to ask: in what situations might immobility and stillness be a desired option? When might mobility itself be coerced, or subject to the whims of those in power? When might immobility be paradoxically connected to mobility, each producing the other?

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.

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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.

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Mimi Sheller is a key theorist in mobilities studies. She is Professor of Sociology and founding Director of the New Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She was co-founder with John Urry of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster.

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¹⁰ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/60sec/2014/01/27/smartphones-and-geolocation-2112>

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