

TAMING THE MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY DILEMMA
IN LABOUR HISTORY: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

CLAUDIA BERNARDI *

The *movements of humans* on our planet across times have been framed into various labels, concepts, and disciplines that most recently have flourished into a fuzzy academic and political debate. Sometimes, this proliferation of concepts has led to ambiguities, some other well known questions have been revived by the re-labelling of terms that made them appear as completely original, most notably criss-cross debates between fields of research and world regions are shaping bottom-up narrations that overcome the sole intellectual exercise of deconstruction of epistemological unities – i.e. the subject, the territory, the nation, etc. As soon as we initiate choosing and mingling terms, conceptual constellations are brought into question. Just when we name a process as a movement, we wonder why not adopt other terms such as motion, mobility, migration, motility, or even kinetics. On a similar guise, whereas specific living entities are named as humans, we are calling into question the alternative adoption of terms such as active subjectivities, workers, labourers, or (even still) men.

Beyond matters of disciplines or academic niches, a manifest positionality in this matter is needed for taming the ‘dilemma’ of human movement. In the first place, it should be assumed that *all humans work*, by participating in theirs and the world’s very generation, reproduction, and production. We work for moving in search of a job, our daily reproduction, or caring for others. By considering humans’ movements, we should be aware that *all humans are mobile*, in their daily life and historically. This assumption is not aimed at forging a universal ahistorical subject fictitiously deprived by social hierarchisations, but for recognizing all humans as generative, productive and dynamic (Bernardi 2023, forthcoming). From this position, we can acknowledge the various forms of valorisation, representation, and

* Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II. Address for correspondence: suomi.bernardi@gmail.com.

control that various political and social actors have enacted – through time and across space – for capturing and imbricating workers. These forms have been labeled and studied in various contexts by different disciplines, but the 20th century has left us a heavy legacy concerning history and human movement.

1. PARALLEL AND CRISS-CROSSING PATHS OF RESEARCH ON WORKERS' MOBILITY

The long – and sometimes exhausting – debate on globalisation and the 'end of history' inscribed mobility into a framework of liberation and power. For sure, commodities and glamorized élites experienced a continuous and heightened circulation that expanded the drivers of capital's accumulation into profitable logistic systems, while human movements faced the militarization of borders, the increased use of detention camps, and forms of confinement. The term globalisation sprouted into a wide range of metaphors and ideas, such as cosmopolitanism, fluidity, hybridity, flows, flexibility, among many others, that somehow aimed to counterbalance centuries of knowledge production on static dichotomies. In fact, investigations in the fields of humanities and social sciences have depicted an encompassing understanding of mobility by joining a poststructuralist approach that overcame the rigidity of structures, the centrality of stasis, the integrity of the body, and the dualisms invented by colonial modernity (Glick-Schiller 2004; Salazar 2013). The "body without organs" of the nomad stands as the most exemplary concept of this step forward for the Western world (Deleuze and Guattari 2003).

Historians often perceived the antagonism between the freedom of capital's mobility and the immobility of humans as fictitious. The slave ship is probably the most dramatic image that embodies the long history of this opposition: it was a vessel, but also a factory, a prison, a trading station, and a war machine in which humans were profitably valorised through a forceful mobility in chains (Bernardi and Vanhaute 2021). Moreover, this image undermines the clear-cut identification of mobility with freedom and of immobility with un-freedom that have been crystallized as a worldview through this debate.

The so-called 'mobility turn' embraced the 1980s intellectual innovations and questioned the exclusive focus on people while placing them within the broader flow of goods, objects, capital and information (Urry 2002). The 'rhythm-analysis' by Henri Lefebvre (1992) was a pivotal study that paved the way for scrutinizing the many faces of movement in relation to time. Since that impressive investigation, scholars wondered about the rhythm as a relation between mobility and immobility, the movement

of the human body in association to the one of capitalism, the making of hierarchies through routes, the speed and experience of travel from a subjective perspective, the frictions in mobility and their uneven distributions, and the balance of power between subjects in shaping mobility (Cresswell 2006). A new field emerged from this 'turn' and Mobility Studies innovatively affirmed "the power of discourses, practices and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects of both movements and stasis" (Sheller 2011: 2). Various entities *on the move* were tracked and understood in relation to the others, without believing a static condition as natural assumption. Static and motion ceased to be parallel antagonistic terms, but became related dispositions subjected to change: "fixity and moorings" configure and enable mobility itself by operating both in a physical and a cultural sense (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006).

This multi-dimensional approach somehow endorsed the well-established analysis of Border Studies that already underlined the limitations to freedom in mobility as human movements are top-bottom designed, channelled into corridors, governed by various institutions and informal actors, controlled and tracked by surveillance devices, and have striking consequences also on non-human entities. Also, the access to mobility is differentiated and hierarchized along lines of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, and status, among others. With a consonant aim, scholars adopted the concept of "regimes of mobility" as the on-going dynamic between conditions of settlement and those of movement within situations of unequal power that legitimize, or prevent, the mobility and immobilization of people (Glick-Schiller 2004, 2009). In other terms, this innovative approach wishes "to interrogate the situations in which certain kinds of mobility, or certain types of mobile individuals, become the subjects of praise or condemnation, desire, suppression or fear [...]. The discussion of mobility and immobility reflects and shapes our understanding of time as well as space" (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013: 196). The last reference to time and space evidently refers to history, even if the 'mobility turn' scarcely embraced and built up on historical studies of human movements.

On an earlier track, the scholarship in Migration History and Studies grounded human movements into the process of migration, scrutinizing the individual and groups perspectives, the cultural and political role of the communities of departure and arrivals, the social construction of categories of migrants, and the related typologies of movements. The attention to the legal and social status of humans has detected a plethora of terms and labels as refugee, economic migrant, commuter, expat, postcolonial migrant, "illegals" – just to name a few (Hoerder 2002; Nail 2015) –, while the interdisciplinary debate on taxonomies of migrations has multiplied categories and neologism to better grasp the causes for which humans

move (Castles and Miller 2003; Schrover 2019). By considering human productivity, the historical research on global migration and labour history has analysed the conceptualization of work, the movements of workers and the correlated systems of labour control across times – in particular in relation to the expansion of capitalism –, providing long-term perspectives and uncountable case studies worldwide (Hoerder 2002; McKeown 2004; Mohapatra 2007; van der Linden 2008; Mohapatra and van der Linden 2009; Lucassen, Lucassen and Manning 2010; Lucassen and Lucassen 2014). Far from being a marginal or supplementary labour force, migration is postulated as a “structural necessity to advanced capitalist countries” (Cohen 1987), or better to say, the work and activity performed by mobile humans – the frontier of labour – is constituent of capitalism since its outset as a global process (Bernardi and Vanhaute 2021).

Historical taxonomies and questions on the role of migrant workers in the history of capitalism have been reflected in the studies on mobility and capitalism – even if they mostly refer to recent times – in which attention is paid to the relation between spatial and social mobility within the framework of neoliberal requirements (Sassen 1988; Nail 2015; Bastos, Novoa and Salazar 2021). In particular, circular or short-term mobility has been identified as the pivotal form of work employed by global neoliberal capitalism to circumscribe freedom, impose precarity, and restrict rights (Glick-Schiller 2009; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Nonetheless, despite identifying potential unfree conditions of labour mobility within the operating of capitalism, still this approach relates mobility mainly to freedom and present-day regimes of labour: “Mobility is, then, a contradictory form of freedom, produced by the needs and effects of global capital, yet resistant to total control by capital or the state. Labour mobilities, marked by the imposition of restrictive regulation, are entirely consistent with neoliberal labour regimes and their need for flexible, docile, and expendable labour” (Bastos, Novoa and Salazar 2021: 158). Echoing historical approaches, the term entanglement has been adopted also in these recent investigations for describing the non-linear connection between mobility and labour, and for avoiding rigid dichotomies (*ibid.*: 159). Still, the semantic field of mobility persists to correspond to the one of freedom.

How do we depart from the antagonism of movement and stasis of labour that is still interlaced with the symmetrical one of freedom and unfreedom? This is one of the most intriguing current dilemmas in the blurred field of global labour history.¹ Novel paths of research may weave

¹ For the editor’s understanding of global history, see BERNARDI and VANHAUTE 2021, 2024 (forthcoming).

seminal analytical tools for which mobility-immobility and coercion-autonomy are not dualistic oppositions, but conceptual constellations aimed at drawing out workers' practices across time and space.

Only collaborative projects will be able to fruitfully tackle this dilemma. The issue "Mobility, Labour, Right: Historical Trajectories and Interactions in the Americas and Europe (XVIII-XX centuries)" is placed at the crossroad of the questions addressed by the aforementioned studies for navigating this dilemma. It presents five contributions that complicate the picture illustrated so far by following the trajectories depicted by workers through conflicting and coexistent practices of mobility and immobility in various historical contexts of the Americas and Europe.

2. WEAVING ONE *FIL ROUGE* THROUGH DIFFERENT STRANDS: THE ESSAYS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue explores the coexistence of mobility and immobility as constitutive elements for making the space of labour, and for sketching workers' trajectories of autonomy and coercion. Each of these contributions brings the reader into the prismatic relation between workers' spatial movement and juridical forms of management and control. The essays bring the reader across Europe and the Americas along three centuries, and each provides its own peculiar contribution to the general approach of the special issue by weaving a common *fil rouge*.

Nicoletta Rolla investigates the tension between juridical tools and informal mechanisms that allowed the mobilisation or immobilisation of workers in 18th century Northern Italy. In her essay, "The Perimeters of Mobility in Early Modern Construction Sites (Savoy States, 18th Century)", mobility is a consubstantial condition of work itself, as construction labour always imposes the change of contractor and place, depending on the extent, season, and progress of each job. In this contribution is evident that there is not a simple intertwining of labour and mobility, but *mobility makes* the work relation that was regulated and managed through different economic and juridical devices. The ever-changing work site turns to be a broader space in which construction workers move through their networks and thanks to their knowledge. A "transnational labour market" was mapped through the movements of workers, but also their contacts and their reputation. The skills of each worker may drive them from one place to another, creating a network of relations that was fundamental for getting another job and then expanding again the pool of contacts: mobility is the work itself for construction workers. The knowledge of workers allowed some of them to be always mobile, and hence giving better con-

tinuity to their temporary and strongly unstable job. For others, unemployment, indebtedment and retention of wages turned into *de facto* immobilisation and impoverishment that was balanced by welfare activities and logistic support of confraternities for returning the workers home as they wished, together with appealing to courts for demanding the due payment of wages by masters. While the lack of money undermined the possibility of further movements, the ‘use of right’ by workers was aimed at reopening the path of mobility.

The essay, “Runaway Heuristics: A Micro-Spatial Study of Immobilising Chains c. 1790”, by Johan Heinsen proposes a dense constellation of concepts for understanding the social history of runaways in 18th century Denmark-Norway through the heuristic lens of coercion. This new social history of labour coercion investigates the practiced interrelations at the level of grammars, spaces or strategies that disrupt the constructed identities of methodological nationalism by disentangling the interaction of the different strands that produced a process (WORCK). In this view, the space of coercion is made by the practice of social relations and is found by the assemblage of mobilisation and immobilisation. For exploring this space, the author relies on the set of linkages and social relations traced by escaped convicts that compose the “chains” of coercion. These chains are mappable and identified by the sources, but more importantly they were adopted by the same judges to place the runaways on a different grade of punishment: the more the fugitive had scaled up the chain of violations, the more the law would have sanctioned him. In this essay, we can witness how mobility and right depict and perform dynamic processes; in fact, the spark of autonomy that pushed the convicts out of forced immobilisation created a set of trajectories of mobility that were *captured* by law officials and were turned into disciplinary and punishing actions.

Giulia Bonazza investigates the continuity of enslaved and former enslaved people’s practices of mobility despite the juridical abolition of slavery in her essay titled “Enslaved Labour and Im/Mobility in the Mediterranean: The Italian Case (1762-1885)”. The life in five Mediterranean ports in the 18th and 19th centuries allows understanding the role of multifaceted juridical tools in the mobilisation of state and public owned enslaved people. The immobilisation of these workers was contingent on their physical appearance, skin colour, age, and ethnic origins as described by the sources collected; in other terms, the racialization of the enslaved bodies, through assigned and invented categories, overcame the juridical status as the main criteria for governing the mobility of former enslaved workers. The social dynamics in two peculiar sites shed light on the correlation between mobility and immobility: the galleys and the House of Catechumens. In both sites, the forced immobilisation could be turned into both spatial and social mobility through

a wide arrange of practices – escape, liberation, ransom, or religious conversion – that were either supported or recognized by intermediaries, relatives and institutions. Whether “free” or “unfree” by law, enslaved people’s physical qualities entered the negotiations between actors by affecting the social and spatial mobility of workers to the extent that there was a pronounced element of continuity in patterns of slave and captive im/mobility.

Federica Morelli highlights the deployment of mobility by enslaved people to enter civil litigation and pursue their freedom. In her contribution titled “Slavery, Mobility, and Freedom in the Spanish Atlantic During the Age of Revolutions”, law is understood not as a set of fixed precepts, but as a “social and political space” in which various actors continuously negotiate their interests. On one side, the juridical system was entered by enslaved people to better their living and working conditions; on the other side, these litigations and cases made the Spanish law on slavery, then showing the constituent role of enslaved people in the making of colonial states and the broader society. The ‘use of right’ for re-negotiating their price and buy back freedom is particularly telling of the entanglements between mobility, labour, and law. A specific practice established a strong link between freedom and mobility: whereas enslaved people entered a litigation, they were allowed to leave the master’s house for the duration of the trial. The peculiar use of rights and the idea of freedom allowed enslaved persons to improve their mobility in the cities, and to be recognized of temporary freedom for the need of pursuing freedom. In other terms, the potential renegotiation of a legal status opened a path of mobility that, itself, reinforced the ‘right to move’.

The essay, “*Ejidatario and Bracero: The Troublesome Relation between Land and Mobility in Mexico (1940s-1950s)*”, by Claudia Bernardi investigates the relation between peasant’s mobility and forms of land possession by describing the juridical framework established by the Agrarian reform, and assessing peasants’ practices that interacted with the politics of managed mobility and immobilization. In the historical climax of the agrarian reform that tied up peasants to the land by reinforcing their symbolic role in the making of the revolutionized nation, a wave of complaints by growers emphasised peasants’ escape from that politics of immobilisation. Landless peasants working for growers demanded either land or the enrolment in the program of mobility established with the USA, as they were both seen as viable alternatives for the betterment of their lives. Once returned home, these mobile peasants petitioned the government for obtaining land as a reward for their efforts in a foreign country; in other terms, the mobility was a workers’ practice that served for their desired immobilisation. At the same time, peasants who obtained land, hence their desired immobilisation, embraced mobility also illegally to accomplish their desire of a better life, or to escape from coercive and poor working conditions.

While workers' valorisation by various actors occurred along the routes of mobility as much as in the places of immobilisation, they used both mobility and immobilisation as drivers for their autonomy by refusing states' legal structure and politics towards the fulfilment of their desires.

REFERENCES

- BASTOS C., NOVOA A. and SALAZAR N.B. 2021, "Mobile Labour: An Introduction", *Mobilities*, 16 (2): 155-163. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885840> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- BERNARDI C. 2023 (forthcoming), "Capture, Coexistence and (Im)Mobility of Labour Forms through the Borders", in M. Atzeni, A. Mezzadri, D. Azzellini, P. Moore and U. Apitzsch (eds.), *Research Handbook on the Global Political Economy of Work*, UK: Edward Elgar Publisher.
- BERNARDI C. 2020, "Within the Factory of Mobility. Practices of Mexican Migrant Workers in the 20th Century US Labor Regimes", in R. Vij, T. Kazi and E. Wynne-Hughes (eds.), *Precurity and the International Relations*, UK: Palgrave MacMillan: 253-277. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/44385949/Within_the_Factory_of_Mobility_Practices_of_Mexican_Migrant_Workers_in_the_Twentieth_Century_US_Labour_Regimes (accessed April 20, 2022).
- BERNARDI C. and VANHAUTE E. 2024 (forthcoming), *Global History of the Living Planet. A Human Narrative*.
- BERNARDI C. and VANHAUTE E. 2021, *A Global History of Humanity*, vol. 2: *Connecting Frontiers from Empires to a Capitalist World Economy*, Roma: CISP.
- CANO G. and DELANO A. 2007, "The Mexican Government and Organised Mexican Immigrants in the United States: A Historical Analysis of Political Transnationalism, 1848-2005", *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies Working Paper 148*, San Diego: University of California. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/53522857/The_Mexican_Government_and_Organised_Mexican_Immigrants_in_The_United_States_A_Historical_Analysis_of_Political_Transnationalism_1848_2005_ (accessed April 20, 2022).
- CASTLES S. and MILLER M.J. 2003, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (1993), Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- COHEN R. 1987, *The New Helots. Migrants in the International Division of Labor*, Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company.
- CRESSWELL T. 2006, *On the Move. Mobility in the Modern Western World*, London: Routledge.
- DE GENOVA N. and PEUTZ N.M. 2010, *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- DELEUZE G. and GUATTARI F. 2003, *Mille piani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia* (1980), Roma: Castelvecchi.
- GLICK SCHILLER N. 2009, "A Global Perspective on Migration and Development", *Social Analysis*, 53 (3): 14-37. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2009.530302> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- GLICK SCHILLER N. 2004, "Transnationality", in N. Nugent and J. Vincent (eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell: 448.
- GLICK SCHILLER N. and SALAZAR N.B. 2014, *Regimes of Mobility: Imaginaries and Relationalities of Power*, London: Routledge.

- GLICK SCHILLER N. and SALAZAR N.B. 2013, "Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39 (2): 183-200. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- HANNAM K., SHELLER M. and URRY J. 2006, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings", *Mobilities*, 1 (1): 1-22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- HOERDER D. 2002, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- LEFEBVRE H. 1992, *Rhythmanalysis. Space, Time and Everyday Life*, London: Bloomsbury.
- LUCASSEN J. and LUCASSEN L. 2014, *Globalising Migration History. The Eurasian Experience (16th-21st Centuries)*, Leiden: Brill.
- LUCASSEN J., LUCASSEN L. and MANNING P. 2010, *Migration History in World History. Multidisciplinary Approach*, Leiden: Brill.
- MCKEOWN A. 2004, "Global Migration, 1846-1940", *Journal of World History*, 15 (2): 155-189. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170889> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- MOHAPATRA P. 2007, "Eurocentrism, Forced Labour, and Global Migration: A Critical Assessment", *International Review of Social History*, 52 (1): 110-115. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859006002823> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- MOHAPATRA P. and VAN DER LINDEN M. 2009, *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories: Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya*, New Delhi: Tulika.
- NAIL T. 2015, *The Figure of the Migrant*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- PAPADOPOULOS D., STEPHENSON N. and TSIANOS V. 2008, *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the 21st Century*, London: Pluto Press.
- PAPASTERGIADIS N. 2000, *The Turbulence of Migration. Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- PLASCENCIA F.B.L. 2016, "State-Sanctioned Coercion and Agricultural Contract Labour: Jamaican and Mexican Workers in Canada and United States, 1909-2014", in M. van der Linden and M. Rodríguez García (eds.), *On Coerced Labour: Work and Compulsion After Chattel Slavery*, Leiden-Boston: Brill: 225-266.
- SALAZAR N.B. 2013, "Anthropology", in P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman and M. Sheller (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, London: Routledge: 55-63.
- SASSEN S. 1988, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital. A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- SCHROVER M. 2019, "Labour Migration", in K. Hofmeester and M. van der Linden (eds.), *Handbook Global History of Work*, Leiden-Boston: Brill.
- SHELLER M. 2011, "Cosmopolitanism and Mobilities", in M. Nowicka and M. Rovisco (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- URRY J. 2002, "Mobility and Proximity", *Sociology*, 36 (2): 255-274. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036002002> (accessed April 20, 2022).
- VAN DER LINDEN M. 2008, *Workers of the World. Essays Toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill.
- VAN DER LINDEN M. and RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA M. (eds.) 2016, *On Coerced Labor. Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden-Boston: Brill.
- WORCK, WORLDS OF RELATED COERCIONS IN WORK. Available at: <http://worck.eu> (accessed April 20, 2022).