Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects

William Hasty

University of Glasgow


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Book Review

Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects
Tim Cresswell & Peter Merriman (Eds)

Cresswell and Merriman begin this important book by reminding their reader that the study of mobilities in geography is not new. ‘[G]eographers’, they write, ‘are not coming to mobilities anew but are revisiting an old friend’ (p. 4). They point, in fact, to a paper by Percy Crowe, published in this very journal (then the Scottish Geographical Magazine) in 1938, which implored geographers to turn their attention to the study of ‘men and things moving’ (p. 1). Despite Crowe’s call, there appears to have been very little appetite for the study of mobilities among geographers, at least until the 1960s when a number of spatial scientists, particularly those focusing on transport, became interested movement and patterns. Their quarry, however, was the ‘rational-mobile-person’ (p. 2), as Cresswell and Merriman put it, and with such a focus, movement was reduced to ‘a cost’ and thought of as ‘dead time’ (p. 4). The focus in this collection – as with the growing body of work associated with the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ more generally (see Sheller & Urry 2006) – undermines this logic by foregrounding ‘exactly what happens on the move’, and demonstrating ‘[H]ow is mobile time and space filled with liveliness’ (p. 4). In its presentation of a range of diverse and engaging forays into the practices, spaces and subjects of mobility at different scales, the content of this collection realises this ambition in interesting ways.

After a short introduction by the editors, the structure of the book follows its tripartite subheading, dealing firstly with the practices, followed by the spaces, and finally the subjects of mobilities. ‘To move is to do something’, and in the first section of the book, dedicated to the practices of mobilities, there are five chapters exploring the doing of walking, running, dancing, driving and flying (p. 5). Five different modes of embodied mobile practice are critically examined, revealing different but not entirely dissimilar connections between particular technologies and spaces and the practice of mobility. The importance of good traction in the mobile worlds of the hill-walker (p. 28) and the runner (p. 39) is demonstrated by Lorimer and Bale, respectively. The second section of the book presents chapters on roads, bridges, airports, immigration stations and cities, all of which are figured as spaces of mobilities. Focusing on these spaces is, however, about more than simply acknowledging the need for ‘moorings’ in a world of mobile practice and subjectivity; it is also an recognition that ‘[P]ractices of mobility animate and co-produce spaces, places and landscapes’ (p. 7). In their discussion of the changing nature of the immigration stations at Angel Island and Ellis Island, Hoskins and Maddern illustrate this point well, demonstrating how ‘the spaces themselves play an important role in the construction of various types of mobilities practiced and experienced’ (p. 162). The third and final section of the book takes its reader into the mobile worlds of the commuter, the tourist, the migrant worker, the vagrant/vagabond and the refugee. The aim of these chapters is to consider ‘how particular means and styles of moving have come to be associated with distinctive subject positions’ (p. 9). Moutz, in her account of refugees’ mobility, argues that they ‘are a group whose mobility is linked to persecution, displacement and claims for protection’ and as such they are ‘sighted, marked, coded, and forced to move in ways that become encoded in law’ (p. 255). This chapter in particular, and the collection as a whole, excels in productively combining strong empirical material with theoretical insights.
In its diversity of approaches and subject matter, the book also succeeds in offering ways of thinking with and through mobility across different scales of practice, space and subjectivity. The eclectic offerings present productive juxtapositions for the reader, contrasting the worlds of recreational runners with that of forced migrants. Read as a whole, each new chapter complements and challenges aspects of the others. Of course, such collections are more usually dissected by their reader and read (or not) in parts, a fact which is true of both students and academics alike, both of whom are the target audience for this book. Another pleasing feature of the collection was the sustained engagement with historical as well as contemporary concerns, a focus which begins to address one of the major shortcomings of the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (see Cresswell 2010). While the eclecticism remains a positive feature of the book, it will inevitably lead many of its readers to wonder why certain mobilities were ignored. For this reader, the inclusion of a chapter on the mobile worlds of the sea and seafarers would have enhanced this collection (e.g. see Vannini 2011). Another issue readers might identify is the lack of concluding remarks offered. Although some of this work is done by the introduction, I do feel that having a short conclusion at the end of the book which considered themes in common and key questions raised throughout the collection would have been useful. Notwithstanding these minor criticisms, it is clear that this collection is both necessary and timely, drawing together important contributions to the mobilities debates which currently animate significant portions of human geography. For those turning to mobilities for the first time, and for those already engaged with the debates, this book will prove a useful grounding point in a fast moving set of debates.

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