

Im/mobility

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Migration is a deeply contentious subject, often dominated by narratives of displacement. These narratives focus on the forced movement of populations due to conflict, poverty, climate change, or some combination thereof – push factors that have led over 108 million people worldwide to be forcibly displaced, mostly within their own countries (UNHCR 2022). While displacement is a pressing humanitarian issue, its dramatic and urgent nature often overshadows the larger, more gradual processes of internal and international migration that are reshaping societies around the world. Over 280 million people currently reside in countries different from where they were born (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2022), and a far larger, though uncounted, number move between villages, towns, and cities within their own countries.

It is easy to forget that mobility comes naturally to human beings. ‘Ours is a migratory species’, the author Mohsin Hamid reminds us (Hamid 2019). And yet patterns of population movements have evolved dramatically through the ages. In fact, the very definition of ‘migration’ as a change in residence across an administrative boundary presumes a modern state apparatus and ‘rooted’ lives registered to residences (Malkki 1992; de Haas, Castles and Miller 2019). Highly mobile ways of life – whether the traditional movements of pastoral peoples in the Sahel or the distinctly modern movements of van-dwelling itinerants cycling through seasonal warehouse work in the United States – do not fit easily within this definition. Nor do they fit easily within the modern world. So, indeed, human mobility is not new, but modernity has introduced new modes of mobility and immobility to the human experience.

This essay considers the nature of mobility and immobility in the modern world in three parts. The first defines ‘modernity’, the second critiques prevailing social theories on migration and modernization, and the third argues that to fully grasp the nature of migration in modernity, it is essential to consider various forms of immobility. Throughout the essay, I aim to show how mobility and immobility have different relationships to the dis:connectivity engendered by globalisation and the modern transformation.

Modernity

Modernity means many things, hardly agreed upon by scholars, but two dimensions of the term should be distinguished: the structural conditions and the existential experience. Regarding the former, scholars as early as Marx have sought to define the ‘institutional core’ of modernity: a set of structural conditions that distinguish modern societies from their predecessors – conditions that include industrializa-

tion, bureaucratization, mass education, and rapid transportation (→ **Transport**) and communication technology (→ **Communication Technologies**) (Marx and Engels 1848, 473–83; Berman 1983; Giddens and Pierson 1998; Eisenstadt 2000; de Haas et al. 2020). From this perspective, modernity does not have a clear starting date. Rather, it begins when a particular constellation of these structural conditions emerges within a society, fostering the development of an industrialized nation-state. Its end remains unclear, as societies, their institutional configurations, and economic systems continue to evolve in our global age.

Conversely, modernity also refers to a more ephemeral but no less powerful existential reality: the collective experience of life under the structural conditions described above. Sociologist Robert Bellah wrote that the modern should be seen not ‘as a form of political or economic system, but as a spiritual phenomenon or a kind of mentality’ (Bellah 1991, 66). The philosopher Marshall Berman describes well the ‘mentality’ modernity demands:

Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively to demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through. They must learn not to long nostalgically for the ‘fixed, fast-frozen relationships’ of the real or fantasized past, but to *delight in mobility*, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men. (Berman 1983, emphasis added)

Post-modern scholarship rightly resists any singular story about the ‘modern’ experience, yet it also recognizes that no society remains untouched by humanity’s fraught pursuit of ‘modernization’. All must find a way through the maelstrom of modernity (Berman 1983), embracing or resisting the personal, social, and societal transformation it demands. And for better and for worse, the individual or collective embrace of modernity often requires ‘delighting in mobility’, accepting a disconnection from our pasts in pursuit of a different, a better future.

Migration and modernization

The structural shifts of modernity correlate with distinctive migration patterns, most notably with a global urban transition. In 1800, some 15–20% of people lived in cities. This figure rose to 34% by 1960 and surpassed 50% by 2007, with some projections suggesting 68% of the global population will reside in urban areas by 2050 (UNPD n.d.). Transformations in international migration trends may be seen as an integral part of this global urban transition. International migration is increasingly directed towards global cities in wealthier countries, contrasting with earlier forms of frontier or settler migration and the Transatlantic slave trade of previous centuries (Czaikas and de Haas 2014).

Beyond this urban transition, a rich body of empirical research is uncovering clear patterns in the relationship between migration and different indicators of development at the country-level (Skeldon 1990; Clemens 2020; de Haas 2010). In the simplest terms, a country's pursuit of 'development' tends to accelerate a sedentarization of traditional forms of mobility, an urbanization of internal mobility, and a diversification of international migration (of which the rise of international *labour* migration is one of the most striking forms) (Skeldon 1990; Schewel and Asmamaw 2021).

Despite clearer patterns in the big-picture relationships between migration and development, existing social theories struggle to fully explain these dynamics. In fact, dominant theories present inescapably normative and essentially opposite views about the nature of this relationship.

Consider early modernization theory, the rigid and paternalistic parent of what we call 'development' today. Modernization became a dominant paradigm in the social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s, when the international development agenda took off and development interventions were crafted and justified by theories about how societies become 'modern'. Modernization theories focused primarily on economic growth and industrialization, and they embraced the free movement of goods, capital (→ **Capital**), ideas, and importantly *people* as countries moved from largely agricultural economies to industrial and service-based economies. In fact, for modernization theorists, the reallocation of people (more often termed 'labour') from rural, agricultural areas to urban, industrial sectors is *required* for economic growth. The urbanization of labour, goods, and capital is a taken-for-granted dimension of the development process, played out over and over again in economic history (Todaro 1969), and thus considered fundamental to 'balanced growth'. The same logic applies to the global economy. The free movement of people along wage and population gradients – within or across national boundaries – would lead to converging wage levels. This is the basic tenet of neoclassical migration theory and continues to animate economic research on migration trends today. It is a hopeful vision driven by faith in the market and people's ability to respond rationally to opportunities for material betterment.

In the 1970s and 1980s, critiques of modernization began to gain influence. Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory is one particularly persuasive example. Wallerstein suggested that rather than leading to balanced growth, modernization processes were fuelling global inequalities to serve the needs of core capitalist centres (Wallerstein 1979). The integration of peripheral (i.e., poorer, rural, agrarian) regions into the global capitalist system undermines peasant livelihoods and uproots peasants from their rural ways of life. From this perspective, the movement of labour and capital to the city is not a rational response of free agents,

but a coerced displacement that serves the needs of the capitalist system more than everyday people.

The penetration of capitalism into poorer areas only furthers dependency or, as the German sociologist Andre Frank famously put it, the ‘development of under-development’. As the Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal similarly argued in his theory of cumulative causation, economies of scale tend to deepen poverty in the periphery and accelerate the growth of core areas, furthering inequalities and driving out-migration from the periphery to the core (Myrdal 1957; Massey 1990). This dynamic occurs both within countries (rural-urban) and across countries (poor-rich countries). From this perspective, migration is driven by the livelihood *displacement* and deepening inequalities that come from ‘development’.

Critical development theories helped disenchant the myth of modernization for many development practitioners and led to more people-centred development approaches in subsequent decades. Yet, these critical perspectives also left a lasting imprint of migration as a problem, or at least a symptom of greater problems, that at times does a disservice to migrants themselves. We are still left with two very different and dissatisfying portraits of ‘the migrant’. The first is a rational utility-maximizer predictably following wage and population gradients to better their economic prospects. The second is a passive pawn, as geographer Hein de Haas put it, ‘pushed around the globe by the macro-forces of global capitalism’ (de Haas 2021). The former celebrates migration; the latter laments it as a sign of social stress. Neither perspective alone does justice to the reality of migration and its driving forces, nor the multifaceted human beings choosing to move or to stay as their societies and environments change.

Since the turn of the century, migration scholarship has moved away from big picture theories about development and modernization, turning instead to the elaboration of more sophisticated micro-level frameworks that illuminate the aspirations, capabilities, networks, and norms that shape migration decision-making and behaviour (de Haas 2021; Müller-Funk, Üstübcici and Belloni 2023; Carling and Collins 2018). What this more grounded research reveals is a complex coexistence of agency and constraints, of volition and limited choice, of opportunity and injustice shaping new patterns of mobility and immobility under a global capitalist system. Rather than clarify the contours of ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ migration, it muddled them (Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Schewel 2021). Further, it reveals a puzzling reality that is not easily unexplained by the optimistic neoclassical or pessimistic historical structuralist theories: widespread *immobility*—people do not want to move or cannot move despite societal changes that seem to demand it.

The challenge of the immobile

The geographer Doreen Massey originally argued that different individuals and social groups have distinct relationships to mobility in the modern world: ‘some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it’ (Massey 1994, 149). As I have argued elsewhere, a mobility bias in migration research prevents us from seeing how the same may be said of the immobile: some are ‘in charge’ of their immobility, while others feel imprisoned by it (Schewel 2019).

Those who feel imprisoned by their immobility are those who aspire to migrate—who believe a better life is elsewhere – yet lack the ability to leave. As Jorgen Carling has forcefully argued, ‘involuntary immobility’ may be more common than migration, challenging the characterization of our global age as an age of mass migration (Carling 2002). Widespread involuntarily immobility reveals the injustices of the modern world, not least of which are the ‘regimes of mobility’ that privilege the movement of the ‘high-skilled’ while constraining the movement of the ‘low-skilled’ or asylum seekers (Fitzgerald 2019; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013). Only by seeing those who feel imprisoned by their immobility can we appreciate the degree to which social and economic mobility relies upon spatial mobility, and how modern societies fail those who fail to move.

But not all of those who remain in place are involuntarily so. If the modern mentality demands that we ‘yearn for change’ and ‘delight in mobility’, as Berman suggests, how should we think about those who dare to be content where they are or refuse to move – those who *delight in immobility*? In my own scholarship, I have been drawn to understanding the ‘voluntarily’ or ‘acquiescently’ immobile – those who do not aspire to migrate. In essence, these are those who resist the disconnections modernity demands from the people and places that nurtured them.

It is not only the elite or wealthy who have the privilege of aspiring to stay. Aspirations to stay are surprisingly common among groups who outsiders might assume have much to gain from migration: the poor, the less educated, those living in rural communities (Debra, Ruysen and Schewel 2023; Schewel and Fransen 2022). The reluctance or refusal to migrate is sometimes attributed to ‘cognitive constraints’ that prohibit fully ‘rational’ decisions. It is more commonly explained in terms of various attachments: territorial attachments to a specific locality, whether it be a town, region, or country; social attachments to family and local community; economic attachments to location-specific assets or investments that are difficult to move, such as a house or local business; cultural attachments, like a sense of identity and belonging that is intimately tied to a place; or psychological attachments, like the ‘intimacy the mind makes with the place it awakens in’, as the philosopher poet Wendell Berry puts it (Berry 1968). Beyond these place attachments, there are also instances of place *commitment*, the proactive choice to stay in a place due to a

sense of duty or purpose, even if it means sacrificing personal advantages or other attachments. Even at the expense of self- or societal ‘development’.

Voluntary immobility has challenged the aims and assumptions of modernization since its earliest beginnings. One of the first depictions of voluntary immobility in modern literature is seen through the characters Philemon and Baucis in Goethe’s *Faust*. This seminal work from the early 1800s narrates the story of Dr. Faust, who, despite his vast intellectual achievements, remains dissatisfied with his life and enters into a pact with Mephistopheles, a devil, for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. Philemon and Baucis appear later in the play, after Faust’s ventures into love, drugs, and politics leave him seeking greater fulfilment by becoming a protagonist of modernization and development.

In his role as Developer, Faust meets Philemon and Baucis, an elderly couple residing in a quaint, picturesque seaside cottage. They lead a modest, contented life, deeply rooted in tradition and simplicity – starkly contrasting with Faust’s relentless ambition. Coveting their land for its scenic and strategic importance, Faust offers them money and farmland elsewhere, but they steadfastly refuse to leave. His frustration with their resistance culminates in a command to Mephistopheles to forcibly evict and resettle them. Mephistopheles and three men, under the cover of night, murder the couple and burn their home. Faust expresses shock and remorse upon learning of their deaths, yet his command was, as Berman notes in his commentary on the play, ‘a characteristically modern style of evil: indirect, impersonal, mediated by complex organizations and institutional roles’ (Berman 1983). Berman’s interpretation of *Faust* emphasizes the tragedy of development – of the devastation and ruin that are built in the process and promise of modernization. Of Philomena and Baucis he writes, ‘They are the first embodiments in literature of a category of people that is going to be very large in modern history: people who are in the way – in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete.’ (Berman 1983, 67).

Many like Philemon and Baucis remain in the world, and their presence challenges commonly-held ideas about human nature and what should constitute ‘progress’. They may be found in communities who face severe climate and environmental risks yet refuse relocation programs (Farbotko et al. 2020). They may be found in communities across rural and urban America, puzzling government workers who lament that poor people are not moving to better-paid work like they used to (Semuels 2017; see also Preece 2018). They thwart researchers surveying migration intentions who find that a respondent has never really considered the idea of leaving and thus never developed an ‘intention’ one way or another. Rather than see these immobile populations as ‘in the way’, ‘backwards’, or ‘obsolete’, perhaps they have something to teach us.

While migration continues to be a visible and potent manifestation of modernity's dynamics, the steadfastness of those who choose or are forced to remain immobile provides an equally significant counter-expression. This volume challenges a linear, connection-based understanding of globalisation, illustrating how different forms of disconnection are inherent to the globalisation process. This chapter similarly questions narratives of globalisation and modernity that prioritize movement, flux, and placelessness.

As new forms of human mobility emerge in the modern world, so too do new forms of immobility – each offering unique insights into the ‘modern condition’. A focus on involuntary immobility, for instance, reveals the manifold injustices that determine who has access to and control over their mobility. The involuntarily immobile highlight the contradictions of a modern world that presumes spatial mobility is necessary for social and economic advancement, yet constructs migration regimes to constrain the mobility of the world's poorest. However, the stories of Philemon and Baucis, and the millions like them who remain attached or committed to place, remind us that not all immobility is involuntary, nor do people always aspire to ‘social and economic mobility’ as defined by our development frameworks. In this light, voluntary immobility can be a powerful act of resistance. Its widespread prevalence around the world demands that we expand and enrich our theoretical frameworks and craft policies that honour and support the diverse needs and aspirations of all individuals, regardless of whether they move or stay.

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