

Tourism mobilities: still a current issue in tourism?

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Abstract

It is over a decade since the mobilities agenda first emerged in substantive form. Cohen and Cohen's (2014) paper provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the achievements of mobilities thinking as it relates to travel and tourism, in other words 'tourism mobilities'. Viewed in multiple historical contexts, the emergence of a mobilities approach to understanding tourism is entirely justified. However, it is an important backdrop for any state-of-the-art or cutting-edge analysis of tourism mobilities. Three enduring but fundamental issues regarding the study of tourism mobilities are raised, including whether the tourism mobilities agenda travels well. International comparative work of this nature on emerging world regions is clearly welcome and offers significant insights. However, viewed against its historical backdrop, it raises questions about the level of interest and penetration of the tourism mobilities agenda generally, and beyond Europe, North America and Australasia specifically. In the process, it raises the spectre that interest in tourism mobilities is perhaps not what it once was and the tourism academy may have moved on to the next grand challenge.

Time marches on inevitably and waits for no one. It is over a decade since the mobilities agenda first emerged in a substantive form (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2004a, 2004b). Cohen and Cohen's (2014) contribution provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the achievement of mobilities thinking as it relates to travel and tourism, in other words 'tourism mobilities'. To be clear, there has been other recent analysis of key developments in research on tourism mobilities (Hannam et al 2014) and the intention of this commentary is not specifically to rehearse nor critique ideas that have appeared elsewhere. Rather,

the publication of Cohen and Cohen's timely paper provokes a series of points for further contemplation and discussion, not least regarding the evolution and currency of tourism mobilities research.

Looking back, the appeal of the mobilities 'turn' or 'paradigm' (as it was trailed at the time) was –and remains- the opportunity to challenge some of the dominant ways of knowing, and thinking about, tourism (Sheller and Urry 2004b; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006; Creswell 2006). It offered an alternative to viewing tourists in a passive or static sense as subjects frozen for analysis before, during or after their trips (Hall 2005). The nature of the gaze shifted from the individual to movement or what is/was mobile (Urry 2000; 2007). Tourism was recast as one among several forms of activity where bodies, goods, commodities, ideas and knowledge are in motion. Here was a way of thinking that challenged the ossifying late-modern views of 'home' and 'away', 'everyday' and 'exotic' that had dominated traditional ways of conceptualising tourism until that point. Of course, this is a necessary simplification. However, as a prominent body of work pointed out at the time, there was a need to take a more nuanced view of how travel and tourism related to and resonated with people's lives, their identities, their ways of knowing and being in the world that was not being captured by existing orthodoxies (Crouch 1999; Hall and Williams 2002).

Taking a wider view, a focus on mobilities made sense in its multiple historical contexts. Mobilities gathered traction in parallel to ever greater globalisation (Harvey 2006). The latter was, according to Ritzer (2004), characterized by increased consumption of both space and services fuelled by new banking arrangements, changes in personal finance, and availability of credit. This was ahead of the global financial crises (Buckley 2011); before

climate change (Stern 2007), peak oil (Roberts 2004; Becken 2008) and rising oil prices became media cause-celebres; and prior to falling demand in many developed economies resulting from austerity measures. Innovation cycles became much shorter and technological frontiers were being pushed back ever further. Long- and short-haul air transport were proliferating around the world (Franke 2004; de Wit and Zuidberg 2012). In short, the friction of time and space mattered far less than in the past. Many more people were travelling than before, they were making more trips, and their trips were more complex in nature. Mobile communication had blurred the boundaries between work and leisure time. New modes of tourism consumption and types of tourist behaviour had emerged –and continue to evolve- as a result of market conditions at that time (Hall and Mueller 2004; Connell 2011). A more integrative approach offered scholars the prospect of viewing travel and tourism in a far less siloed manner (Creswell 2006). It encouraged the conceptualisation of tourism as one among, and implicated with, many other forms of mobility and movement that simply should not be considered artificially in isolation. In order to address the grand challenge of understanding increasingly complex tourism behaviours, new types of scholarly dialogues were required between scholars operating beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries (Coles et al 2005, 2006).

Of course, the purpose of such a retrospective is not to indulge in shameless nostalgia for the 'Naughties'. Rather, it offers some very brief, but necessary background to some of the critical issues that applying mobilities thinking to tourism provokes. By its emphasis on mobility and movement, three fundamental questions are raised which are just as relevant today as they were

when the agenda first emerged. Who is mobile? What about immobility? And does the tourism mobilities agenda travel well?

The first question represents a literal view of tourism mobilities, and it prompts a series of attendant questions, such as how do they move, when and why? It also reveals that there are distinct limits to the nature of our understanding of the mobile as subjects. Much visitor or travel research examines those who have the time, (financial) means and rights to travel, and who elect to move. Long-haul travel is certainly not cheap and hence studies of such travellers inherently privilege those who have the ability and willingness to pay. For example, quantitative analyses of Americans overseas disproportionately favour those who have passports before any pretence to sampling is relevant. Admittedly the level of selective bias is not as bad as it used to be but it is still notable. Whereas only 3% of Americans had passports in 1989, by 2012 this had risen to 35% in no small measure because of the 09/11 attacks and the security situation that followed them (Bender 2012).

This is just one among several such indicative examples. However, it serves to illustrate a much wider point. Mobility is relative and for movement to occur, inertia has to be overcome. Of course, another way of looking at this statistic is that nearly two-thirds of Americans have not acquired the necessary documentation to travel across international frontiers. In the process, their potential patterns of mobility are constrained. For critical social science enquiry, the subject of immobility and the issues that accompany it are then, arguably, as urgent and pressing as a literal focus on those in motion. Recent contributions on social tourism (McCabe et al 2011) and pro-poor tourism (Mitchell and Ashley 2010; Scheyvens 2010) are significant for their insights into the meaning

of travel and travel practices among the most disadvantaged and marginalised. Yet, as an increasing array of studies on disability, accessibility and tourism alludes (Shaw and Coles 2004; Buhalis and Darcy 2010; Cole and Morgan 2010), the predominant emphasis in tourism research is still on who moves, not who is immobile.

The final question is rooted in the intellectual genealogy of mobilities thinking and specifically it relates to the nature of the evidence base in the early stages. This is informed in no small measure by material from, and readings of, the developed world, especially Anglo-phone countries. Hence, a lingering question is the extent to which this way of understanding extends to, and provides a useful conceptual framework for, other parts of the world. In many respects, this is made more –rather than less- pressing through the expansions of personal and business travel that have accompanied economic shifts and social changes in China (Ryan and Huang 2013), India (Hannam and Diekmann 2010) and several other transition economies. A somewhat convenient criticism is to allege that the mobilities approach may be a neo-colonial project. However, if that particular controversy is set aside for one moment and a more basic position is taken, a legitimate question is how far does the nature of tourism mobilities beyond Europe North America, and Australasia in fact reflect these areas? Moreover, extending this question further, should our ways of understanding and constructing knowledges about travel, tourism, mobility and movement be the same in otherwise distinctive world regions and why should this be the case?

In this respect, Cohen and Cohen's (2014: 1) contribution provides some welcome insights in six main dimensions. The ambition of their undertaking is

as great as the spatial reach of the paper is wide. It draws in a multitude of perspectives variously from Asia, Africa, Central and South America to challenge 'the Eurocentrism implicit in modernist tourism studies'. Among their starkest observations are that the origins of travel as a concept cannot be taken for granted or assumed to be the same in emerging world regions, and an equivalent emic term to 'tourism' is missing in many of these societies.

Clearly there is no need to rehearse their specific findings in any greater depth here. However, an alternative, deconstructive reading of their text provokes several discussion points about the way in which the body of knowledge on tourism mobilities now over a decade in the making, has evolved. To raise these is in no way to tarnish their synthesis. Far from it. In their favour, as most keen readers will note, they seek corroboration for their views by a thorough inspection of over 230 source documents published mainly in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. But what lies beyond? Set in its own internal context, without doubt this paper has been assembled from an impressive array of material. Conversely, when viewed against the background of the scope and scale of the areas it sets out to portray, the same material appears in a different light. Such a perspective suggests a more modest interest in tourism mobilities beyond the geographical areas that originally inspired such thinking.

Clearly, any paper is a function of the material on which it is able to draw and this is no different. What is more, all researchers are understandably limited in the texts they can access, and draw on, by virtue of their language skills (and/or their ability to pay for translation!). In other research, I have drawn on the work of Steven Lukes (1974) and his interpretations of the complexities of power (Coles and Church 2006). Without entering into a detailed discussion of

his ideas, the exercise of power is manifest in several dimensions. Very simply put, in a second, more subtle form, he illustrates how, what is not discussed or appears not to be discussed (i.e. kept off the agenda), is often every bit as significant and informative as what is. Almost inevitably and although it is extensively informed, a paper of this scope and defined by these parameters leaves the curious reader wondering what contributions published in other languages would contribute, if at all, to this (type of) argument and what may the implications be? What additional insights, alternative perspectives or distinctive counterpoints would such material possibly be able to offer; that is, material that could not for purely legitimate reasons be accessed or incorporated here?

The 'if at all' aspect is perhaps the operative phrase. The main counter-criticism of the second dimension was that it defied empirical observation (Lukes 2005): in other words, how is it possible to know what is not being discussed if it cannot be observed? Of course, in the context of this paper, the natural assumption is perhaps that there are in fact other contributions from scholars in the regions and cultures under inspection, waiting to be revealed. What is more, they would be capable of meaningfully informing a thesis of this nature and discourse about tourism mobilities in general. In this case why is such scholarly endeavour not reaching a wider audience? Language may be one possible explanation; the difficulties of participating in the international academic community may be another, even in an age of (apparently) much higher levels of mobility of people, ideas and information. But what if this assumption is untrue and further material does not exist? What does this say about tourism mobilities as a mode of understanding? One possible explanation may be that the mobilities approach has had only a limited diffusion or failed to

engage tourism scholars more widely across the world. An alternative may be that tourism mobilities has been acknowledged, but is not viewed as a particularly relevant or pressing research agenda by scholars working on, or local to, the regions covered in their review.

To be balanced and in the absence of detailed evidence, none of these possibilities can be entirely accepted or wholly dismissed. Further empirical work is required before a final judgement can be made. Nevertheless, *prima facie*, the third scenario is probably the more likely explanation given the nature and size of the body of knowledge cited by Cohen and Cohen. It may also be a manifestation of what Alvesson (2013) refers to as 'zero sum game' thinking which, as he argues, is a characteristic of the organization of higher education and research these days. In this context and adopting a liberal interpretation, 'zero sum games' may be understood, in a world of finite resources, as the elevated level of attention afforded to some subjects being accompanied and counter-balanced by a relative marginalisation of others. Here it seems, by inference, as though the development of other apparently more salient topics in tourism scholarship in these regions appears to have been at the relative expense of the wider adoption of mobilities thinking to tourism contexts. Thus, one of the most emergent, if not striking features from the present contribution is how little we apparently know, in comparative terms, about tourism mobilities beyond Europe, North America and Australasia over a decade since this new 'turn' in the social sciences first materialized. A paper like Cohen and Cohen's should force us to reconsider what has been achieved by a mobilities approach, and whether it continues to be an especially current issue in tourism analysis. Ultimately, this cannot be resolved in a commentary of this nature. Nevertheless,

as a concluding observation, it is interesting to extend Alvesson's logic. Since the middle of the last decade, several other themes have garnered considerable attention from the tourism academy (at the relative expense of others, including tourism mobilities). Perhaps most conspicuous among these has been research on tourism and climate change. Its rise in popularity prompted Weaver (2011) to question whether the study of sustainable tourism (ironically a subject that itself consumes a large volume of scholarly endeavour) can survive climate change. All of which leaves us to wonder whether tourism mobilities has had its heyday, and tourism scholarship has moved on to the next grand challenge?

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