

## Key figures of mobility: an introduction

Figures of mobility, from nomads to flâneurs and tourists, have been used to describe both self and other in the social sciences and humanities for a long time. They act as a conceptual shorthand in contemporary scholarly debates, allowing social theorists to relate broad-scale phenomena to the human condition. This repeated usage highlights how these figures have become 'keywords', in the sense given by Raymond Williams, which typify much of the vocabulary constituting the study of human mobility today. In this general introduction, I lay out the overall conceptual framework behind the various contributions to this special issue.

**Key words** figures, theory, epistemology, genealogy, anthropology

As a concept, mobility captures the common impression that our life-world is in flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information and ideas circulating across (and even beyond) the planet. The scholarly literature is replete with metaphorical conceptualisations attempting to describe (perceived) altered spatial and temporal movements: deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation and scapes; time-space compression, distanciation or punctuation; the network society and its space of flows; the death of distance and the acceleration of modern life; and nomadology. The interest in mobility, particularly in Europe, goes hand in hand with theoretical approaches that reject 'sedentary metaphysics' (Malkki 1992) in favour of 'nomadic metaphysics' (Cresswell 2006) and empirical studies on the most diverse kinds of mobilities (Adey *et al.* 2013), questioning earlier taken-for-granted correspondences between peoples, places and cultures. The way the term is being used, mobility entails, in its coinage, much more than mere physical motion (Marzloff 2005). It can be seen as movement infused with both self-ascribed and attributed meanings (Frello 2008). Put differently, 'mobility can do little on its own until it is materialised through people, objects, words and other embodied forms' (Chu 2010: 15). Importantly, mobility means different things to different people in differing social circumstances (Adey 2010).

Mobilities have become central to the structuring of people's lives. In many parts of the world, mobility is considered to be an important way of belonging to today's society. We can identify many kinds of 'movers': tourists and pilgrims; migrants and refugees; diplomats, businesspeople and those working for international organisations; missionaries, NGO-workers and people belonging to the most diverse transnational networks; students, teachers and researchers; athletes and artists; soldiers and journalists; children and partners (and service personnel) accompanying the aforementioned people; and those in the traffic and transport industries who move people (including themselves) across the globe.

Mobility research calls attention to the myriad ways in which people become part, in highly unequal ways, of multiple translocal networks and linkages. Notwithstanding the many kinds of involuntary or forced movements (mostly linked to situations of conflict, persecution or environmental threat), the currently dominant discourse links

mobility to three positively valued characteristics: (1) the ability to move, (2) the ease or freedom of movement and (3) the tendency to change easily or quickly (Salazar 2010b; Salazar and Smart 2011; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). This translates into three assumptions, partly influenced by capitalist ideologies, which have been widely spread via public discourses and images about globalisation: (1) there is (increasing) mobility, (2) mobility is a self-evident phenomenon and (3) movement generates positive 'change', often conceived of as an improvement for oneself and one's kin (e.g. in the case of migrants) or for non-related others (e.g. in the case of NGO-workers). In fact, many people link voluntary geographical mobility almost automatically to some kind of moving up, be it economic, social or cultural. In other words, mobility is believed to be an indicator of the variable access to and accumulation of these various types of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986). Distinctions are made, which ultimately feed back into the production of the social through culturally inflected notions of mobility (e.g. the terms 'local' versus 'migrant') (Salazar 2010b). Transnational mobility, for instance, is often seen as endemic to globalisation and as one of the most powerful stratifying factors, leading to a global hierarchy of movements. In other words, the movement of people and the various translocal connections may, and often do, create or reinforce difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing such differences (Salazar 2010a).

Mobility – a complex assemblage of movement, social imaginaries and experience – is not only popular among those who talk about a 'mobility turn' in social theory and who have proposed a 'new mobilities paradigm' to reorient the ways in which we think about society.<sup>1</sup> Influential scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai, Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, David Harvey and Zygmunt Bauman all theorise contemporary capitalism and globalisation in terms of increasing numbers and varieties of mobility: the fluid, continuous (and often seamless) movement of people, ideas and goods through and across space (but for a critique see Trouillot 2003). Mobility appears self-evidently central to modernity as a key social process, 'a relationship through which the world is lived and understood' (Adey 2010: i). Considering mobility as a natural tendency in society naturalises it as a fact of life and as a general principle that rarely needs further justification, making cosmopolitanism and reliance on mobility capital the norm (Nowicka and Rovisco 2009). However, any discourse used to discuss questions of mobility is inevitably value-laden (Frello 2008).

Critical analyses of mobility, often by anthropologists, focus attention on the political-economic processes by which people are bounded, emplaced, allowed or forced to move (Cunningham and Heyman 2004; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Such studies show how mobility is materially grounded. The physical movement of people entails not only a measure of economic, social and cultural mobility, but also a corresponding evolution of institutions and well-determined 'circuits of human mobility' (Lindquist 2009: 7). Importantly, the substance of such circuits is 'the movement of people (and money, goods and news, but primarily people) as well as the relative immobility of people who do not travel the circuit' (Rockefeller 2010: 222).

1 The term 'mobility turn' has been used to indicate a perceived transformation of the social sciences in response to the increasing importance of various forms of movement (Urry 2000, 2007). The 'new mobilities paradigm', then, incorporates new ways of theorising how people, objects and ideas move around by looking at social phenomena through the lens of movement (Hannam *et al.* 2006). It can be seen as a critique of both theories of sedentism and deterritorialisation.

To assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even ‘observe’ it sometimes, one needs to spend a lot of time studying things that stand still (or change at a much slower pace).

Despite all of the attention given to it over recent decades, some are of the opinion that ‘there is still a general failure, especially in the social sciences, to reflect on the meaning of mobility’ (Papastergiadis 2010: 347). Recognising that the mobilities we witness today are not entirely new processes, what are we really talking about when we look at the current human condition through an analytical mobility lens? Deeply grounded in anthropology’s long-term engagement with issues of mobility (Salazar 2013a), this special issue offers a refreshing conceptual reflection by analysing some of the most important key ‘figures’ of human mobility. As the various authors illustrate, the conceptual development of these figures has a distinctly European genealogy.

### Key figures as an analytical approach

The origin of the notion ‘keyword’ is sometimes traced to Michel Bréal’s *Semantics: studies in the science of meaning* (1964 [1900]). This French philologist set out to determine the laws that govern changes in the meaning of words. It was only later that scholars began to turn their attention to the synchronic study of meaning too. In his seminal work *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (1976), Raymond Williams explored the changing meanings and contexts of the pivotal terms used in discussions of culture (beginning with the notion of ‘culture’ itself). In his introduction, he identified keywords ‘in two connected senses. They are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain uses bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society’ (1976: 15).

Importantly, keywords are ‘essentially contested concepts’ (Gallie 1956); that is, they never acquire a closed or final meaning (not even within one domain or discipline). The meaning of a keyword is never settled until it truly disappears from common use or its scholarly paradigm goes into decline. As keywords acquire new meanings, they do not shed old ones. Historically, keywords accumulate meanings, sometimes contradictory ones, and even when one is dominant, others remain available and can be reaffirmed. Moreover, keywords rarely shift their meaning in isolation but rather in conjunction with others. Revising *Keywords* himself for a second edition, which included 21 additional concepts, Williams reaffirmed his ‘sense of the work as necessarily unfinished and incomplete’ (1985: 27). The sharing of a word across differing domains of thought and experience was often imperfect, he noted, but this very roughness and partiality indicated that the word brought something significant to discussions of ‘the central processes of our common life’ (1985: 27).

Various scholars have played with keywords to clarify their theoretical framework. Jean Baudrillard’s *Passwords* (2003) and Gilles Deleuze’s 1988–9 televised *Abécédaire* (2011) are but two known examples. In August 2011, the Wenner-Gren journal *Current Anthropology* presented a set of articles about keywords in anthropology, namely ‘neoliberal agency’, ‘consumption’, ‘identity’ and ‘flow’. In the editorial introduction to the theme, Mark Aldenderfer (2011) reminded the reader that keywords are often multi-layered. While some are ‘commonly encountered in everyday language’, others have ‘special, more restricted meanings, such as is often the case in their scholarly

use' (Aldenderfer 2011: 487). From an academic perspective, it is important 'to identify the meanings the term has taken and to show how these meanings are transformed when new intellectual perspectives and paradigms make their appearance' (Aldenderfer 2011: 487). In the reply to his own contribution in *Current Anthropology*, David Graeber (2011) sketches the history that led to the special section. According to him, it was Lauren Leve's idea 'to study those theoretical terms that were not, really, being debated – or often, really, defined – and why' (Graeber 2011: 508).

Is mobility itself an important keyword? Williams did not think so. However, it does appear in the *New keywords* volume, published 30 years after the original version (Berland 2005). There, it is described as expressing 'different, sometimes contradictory meanings underlying our most fundamental beliefs about progress, freedom, individuation, and power' (Berland 2005: 217). Mobility also appears as a key concept in the latest edition of *Theory in social and cultural anthropology* (Salazar 2013b). Under the letter V of his *Abécédaire*, Deleuze (2011) covers the concept 'voyage' (travel). In ways that remind us of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961), Deleuze talks about how he hates travelling. He also states that he has always been fascinated by nomads because he sees them as people who do not travel and almost stay immobile because they do not want to leave. Sylvia Bredeloup (2013) describes a whole series of figures that have been used by scholars to make sense of African migration in particular (and adds a new one herself). The journal *Cultural Studies* recently showcased an interesting collaborative writing project, entitled 'New keywords: migration and borders' (De Genova *et al.* 2014). The idea behind the project was to call critical attention to the ever-increasing prominence of migration and borders as keywords for apprehending culture and society in our contemporary (global) present.

A related methodology was used by Joshua Barker and Johan Lindquist (2009) in their multi-authored essay 'Figures of Indonesian modernity', published in the Cornell-based journal *Indonesia* in 2009 (a project that they later expanded to the whole of Southeast Asia (Barker *et al.* 2014)). Inspired by the work of Williams on keywords, they propose 'key figures' as 'particular sites that allow access to ideological formations and their contestations' (Barker and Lindquist 2009: 36). Such an approach offers an analytical perspective rather than a decisive theory. A figure in general not only connotes a representation of an (ideal-type) person but also a lived experience of a particular kind.<sup>2</sup> After all, a figure is 'a real person who also is a symbol that embodies the structures of feeling of a particular time and place' (Lindquist 2015: 163).<sup>3</sup> Figures act as concept-metaphors, in both daily life and academic discourse, whose ambiguity 'orient us towards areas of shared exchange' (Moore 2004). At the same time, figures are potentially more loaded than other concepts in the scholar's toolbox due to the semantic blurring between abstract ideal types and persons as living beings. Interestingly, many of the figures covered in their article are directly related to (Indonesian forms of) mobility: the *TKW* (Tenaga Kerja Wanita), or overseas female labour migrant, who embodies the contradictions of class and gender mobility; the

2 Lindquist explains the difference between 'figure' (an ethnographically and historically situated example) and 'type' (a cross-cultural theoretical exemplar) as follows: 'While the figure is contingent on a specific socio-historical context, the type consciously accentuates particular characteristics in order to form the basis for comparison' (2015: 162).

3 For an alternative view, see Nail, who defines a figure (in his example 'the migrant') 'not as a "type of person" or fixed identity but a mobile social position or spectrum that people move into and out of under certain social conditions of mobility' (2015: 235).

*petugas lapangan*, or field agent, who functions as an informal labour recruiter for transnational migrants; and *Pak Haji*, or Mr Hajj, who wears the white cap that proclaims he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Following Barker and Lindquist's (2009) extension of Williams' approach to 'key figures', we scrutinise the figures that have been used to conceptualise human mobility. Figures of mobility, from nomads to flâneurs, act as conceptual shorthand in contemporary scholarly debates, allowing social theorists to relate broad-scale phenomena to the human condition. Despite the proclaimed novelty of the 'mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006), figures of mobile people have been used to describe both self and other in the social sciences and humanities for a long time (Peters 2006).<sup>4</sup> This repeated usage highlights how these figures have become 'keywords', in the sense of Williams (1976), which typify the vocabulary constituting mobility studies today. In this special issue, we interrogate six key figures that have inspired theorisation in mobility research (and beyond): the nomad (Deleuze and Guattari 1986), the exile (Said 2000), the pilgrim (Bauman 1996), the tourist (MacCannell 1976), the pedestrian (de Certeau 1984) and the flâneur (Benjamin 1996).

Although deeply grounded in anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork, our project is not specific to a discipline (Burgett and Hendler 2007), key thinker (Baudrillard 2003; Deleuze 2011) or tradition (Safri and Ruccio 2013). Instead, it grapples with commonly held scholarly ideas concerning mobility. Like Williams, we trace the evolution of our key figures, adopting a genealogical approach that not only explains the meaning of a concept today, but the contestation and points of rupture in which the clusters of meaning shifted in a historical perspective. As the various contributions taken together illustrate, there is much to be gained analytically from using key figures to examine human experiences of mobility. An anthropological approach in particular has much to offer here, as it allows for an in-depth comparison between the theoretical use of key figures and the lived practices on which the figures themselves are originally based.

In his formative work, Williams recognised that due to certain social forces, 'in certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings [were] offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed' (1976: 12). He sought meanings to formerly understood words through examination of general discussions and separated disciplines, a process that 'posed new questions and suggested new kinds of connection' (1976: 14). By design, the articles on each of our mobility-related key figures will form the foundation of an intellectual conversation about the complex interrelationship between ethnography, these concepts and their analytical value for knowledge production in anthropology in particular and the social sciences in general.

## Outline

All contributors to this special issue are active members of EASA's Anthropology and Mobility Network (AnthroMob). Founded in 2010 during the 11th Biennial Conference of EASA in Maynooth, Ireland, this network aims to facilitate theoretical and methodological exchanges about anthropology and mobility. It fosters

4 Travel in general has been a dominant metaphor for rational thought from de Montaigne to Rousseau (Van den Abbeele 1992) and many of the concepts commonly used are marked by gender, class, ethnicity and culture (Braidotti 1994; Kaplan 1996).

intellectually stimulating debates among anthropologists working on mobility along various thematic and conceptual lines, while also creating exciting opportunities for meetings, relationships, collaborative research and publications (including the ‘Worlds in motion’ book series published by Berghahn Books). ‘Key figures of mobility’ is part of a larger scholarly project aiming to analyse critically the conceptual basis of mobility studies (Salazar 2013a, 2013b; Salazar and Jayaram 2016).

Each contributor within this special issue grounds the exploration of a given key figure in its relation to ethnographic data. Despite the interdisciplinary nature of mobility studies, anthropology’s historic recognition of the tensions between etic theoretical categories and emic perspectives informed through fieldwork places anthropologists in a unique position to assess the ways human mobility has been ‘figured’. Acknowledging the many key figures of mobility that have been developed out of personal experience and ethnographic practice, they explore the usefulness of these figures, as concept-metaphors, in contrast to figures born from abstract theoretical reflection. Many key figures of mobility have been conceptualised as an extension of, or alternative to, existing theoretical figurations of mobility. In this sense, the flâneur and the pedestrian, the pilgrim and the tourist, the nomad and the exile are all positioned in relation to one another. Many of the alternative figurations in these pairings have emerged from the tension between the etic and the emic during the fieldwork process, demonstrating the contribution of ethnographic practice in conceptualising mobility more generally.

In a double analytical move, each article discusses how the use of a particular key figure has contributed to social theory and how the theorisation of these social types (epistemology) compares to the contemporary ethnographic study of mobile people (ontology). Arguing that attention to ‘key figures’ is as much a methodological approach as a theoretical one, we explore ways of grasping both the generality and the specificity of mobilities around the globe, and interrogate the ideological formations, mobile ontologies and theoretical configurations as they relate to (mobility-related) ethnographic research.

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## Introduction aux figures clés de la mobilité

Du nomade au flâneur en passant par le touriste, les figures de la mobilité s'emploient depuis longtemps dans la description du soi et de l'Autre dans les sciences humaines et sociales. Elles fonctionnent comme raccourci conceptuel dans les débats contemporains, permettant aux théoriciens en sciences sociales de lier des phénomènes majeurs à la condition humaine. Cet usage récurrent met en évidence de quelle façon ces figures sont devenues des 'mots-clés' dans le sens de Raymond Williams, caractéristique d'une grande partie du vocabulaire employé actuellement dans les études traitant de la mobilité. Cette introduction générale décrit le cadre théorique utilisé dans les différents articles de ce numéro spécial.

**Mots-clés** personnage, théorie, épistémologie, généalogie, anthropologie