Some notes on mobility

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"I expect digitalisation to replace mobility in every possible way."[1]

I think we'd all agree that our experience of movement, of mobility—of which cross-border travel is just one element—has changed since February-March 2020. At the time of writing (November 2020), the experience with Covid-19 is affecting our understanding of mobility in daily life, with great differences in how restrictions are enforced across the globe. The mobility of the virus itself has ensured this variety of responses, with the expansion of its physical presence at national and local levels necessarily leading to the contraction of our own. This restricted mobility has caused major disruption across social life, be that the psychological effects of lock-down or the economic cratering that has resulted from fewer goods being moved, bought, and sold. In our field of higher education, it has up to a point accelerated certain changes that would have occurred anyway, rather than causing them single-handedly. One Covid-affected transition that we are definitely in the middle of at the moment concerns the linkage between restricted mobility and already-ongoing processes of digitalization in (higher) education. The acceleration caused by Covid has profoundly condensed the development time available, raising the potential costs for those institutions and individuals unable to adapt.

This text is a Covid-triggered reflection on the wider meaning of mobility in research and teaching and on its general importance for the universities where we work. It proceeds as follows: initial observations on the meaning of mobility as a category of historical enquiry, and how it challenges our interpretive perspectives; a consideration of mobility as a social value, and how Covid-caused conditions have emphasized this all the more; some reflections on mobility as a social accomplishment and the privileges that underlie it; and how the fragility of mobility, exposed by Covid, raises important questions as to where our profession (and its social norms and behaviors) may be heading. Admittedly, these observations are written from a European perspective, which may slant how borders and borderlessness are read. Nevertheless, the more general observations are hopefully relevant in the context of global trends as a whole.

In historical investigation, it is noteworthy that the mobility of ideas, people, and things can still be taken for granted as a necessary factor for much of what

1. Bert van der Zwaan, "Universities around the globe are really proving their worth," May 1, 2020, last accessed July 13, 2020, https://www.nuffic.nl/en/news/universities-around-globe-are-really-proving-their-worth.

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we look at. The additional assumption is that revolutions in communications and transport have made the mobility of people, objects, and ideas only increase in speed and scope over time. Transnational history and its variant, the history of cultural/political transfer, have shed considerable light on the mechanisms behind mobility, and Constructivism's focus on the dissemination of ideas in international relations opened up some of the linkages between mobility and power. Social network analysis is good at visualizing the occurrence of social connections over time, but the relevance of the mobility represented by these connections still requires further examination. Mobility is intricately tied to the fluidity of subjectivities, behavioral patterns, and processes of learning. My own research fields, covering the ideologies and strategies of the "cultural Cold War," transnational anti-communist networks, and the transmission tools of public diplomacy have each in different ways explored the significance of mobility regarding the transfer of ideas, finance, people, objects, and texts, and the outcomes of those transfers. The history of international exchanges and scholarships such as the Fulbright program, a field of enquiry which remains an underexplored aspect of transnational history, addresses these matters directly. My current research projects on "citizen diplomats" in East-West encounters during the Cold War covers the self-asserted mobility of individuals who had the means and contacts to insert themselves—to claim subjectivity and actorness—in international relations of the highest level. In these explorations, transnational networks are all about the uses of mobility to circumvent the limitations and obstacles of national identity, ideology, interest, and isolation. Broadly speaking, the history of U.S. foreign relations has been about elites and interest groups insisting on and creating the conditions for mobility on a global scale. John Hay's "Open Door" notes were about allowing the mobility of trade. "Freedom of movement" of people, finance, and ideas was of course a mainstay of U.S. strategies through the Cold War and beyond, as a means to pressure those regimes that did not comply by these "rules." And so on. We are not always aware of the ingrained positive assumptions that lie behind how mobility is understood. Do the current obstacles to mobility lead us to recognize its fragility? If so, should we conclude that the mobility of select groups has been reliant on the immobility of others?

In terms of research, recognizing the mobility of components through historical time challenges the neat anchoring of social scientific categories. Movement undermines the use of analytical perspectives that are tied to specific spaces and locations. For historians, this could lead to a greater recognition of how mobility not only refers to connections between actors, but also how it tends to jumble up our assumptions of their identities and allegiances. Life-writing, for instance, has gone a long way in capturing the fluid subjectivities of individuals through time.[2] In this context, the most scrutinized social scientific

2. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, ed., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present* (Basingstoke, 2010).

category has of course been the nation-state.[3] Writing in 2003, sociologist Ulrich Beck could still complain that "Much social science assumes the coincidence of social boundaries with state boundaries, believing that social action occurs primarily within, and only secondarily across, these divisions."[4] Although historians had avoided some of the strictures of their social scientific cousins, Beck could still rightly claim that "a significant part of history" had up until then also functioned "on the basis of methodological nationalism."[5] Beck's real interest was to craft a cosmopolitan social science that could investigate the realities of global inequality unhampered by the fragmenting and distorting perspectives of national-focused politics and economics. Although he did not refer to mobility per se in his article (only in passing in relation to migration), it nevertheless represented a significant component in his cosmopolitan quest.

Seven years later, literary historian Stephen Greenblatt produced the seminal *Cultural Mobility* (sub-titled with intent as "A Manifesto") that further sought to surpass analytical rigidities, this time with direct attention for our topic here. Greenblatt's starting point was the same, but he drew specific conclusions from an inability to recognize the relevance of mobility: "The problem is that established analytical tools have taken for granted the stability of cultures. . . . Particular cultures are routinely celebrated for their depth, authenticity, and wholeness, while others are criticized for shallowness, disorientation, and incoherence." For Greenblatt, the implications of this were often avoided because they were simply too difficult to incorporate: "The phenomenon of mobility is acknowledged, of course, but as the exception to the rule or as its more or less violent disruption."[6] Greenblatt, like Beck, was also promoting the notion of cosmopolitanism as a reality that as a rule had been sidelined by the need for epistemological compartmentalization. But the manifesto went beyond that, because it aimed to dislocate our understanding of mobility from our assumptions of borderlessness under late modern globalization. In other words, mobility should not be reduced to merely a necessary or positive side-effect of neoliberalism. And while mobility for Greenblatt and his confrères was a historical given, he cautiously counseled that "the enterprise of tracking the restless and often unpredictable movements of texts, ideas, and whole cultures is still at a very early stage."[7]

Both Beck and Greenblatt of course recognized the negative sides to mobility, be that in terms of unrestricted capital movements and the resulting instabilities and inequalities, or as Greenblatt wrote, "an anxious, defensive, and on occasion violent policing of the boundaries" that were being broken down

3. Babs Boter, Marlene Rensen, and Giles Scott-Smith, ed., *Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Life Writing* (Amsterdam, 2020).

4. Ulrich Beck, "Toward a New Critical Theory with a Cosmopolitan Intent," *Constellations* 10, no. 4 (2003): 453.

5. Ibid, 454.

6. Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2010), 3.

7. Ibid, 7.

between cultures and polities.[8] Since the 1990s, globalized mobility has brought us acts of spectacular terrorism, mass migration driven by economic and environmental hardship, crime syndicates and large-scale human trafficking, and the transmission of viruses—SARS, Ebola, Covid—that represent deadly transfers first between species and then through the human race itself. It is a globalization truism that mobility encapsulates freedom, but also, increasingly, vulnerability and risk. Historians can point to many previous examples of large-scale mobility involving threat and opportunity. The history of migration is self-evident here. The history of internationalism is also an investigation into how recognition of mobility as threat and opportunity (beginning with the mobility of rivers) triggered first cross-border and then international institutional responses to ensure effective management.[9] But mobility represents something more than an administrative problem. It also holds a political, economic, and social *value*, which differs according to whose mobility is being referred to, and who may want to allow it or control it.

The notion that mobility has a certain value is something worth pausing over. In the introduction to the prescient collection *How Knowledge Moves*, historian of science John Krige goes against the flow of scholarship that takes mobility for granted. For him, "The transnational approach effaces the national container as the unit of analysis." Similar to Beck and Greenblatt, Krige criticizes the positive assumptions of late capitalist global mobility. He does so not by questioning its uniqueness, but by querying the extent to which it is actually implemented: "it is one thing for a historian to break the national frame so as to allow movement across borders to come into view. It is another for a transnational actor to do so in practice."[10] Obstacles—sometimes bureaucratically opaque, sometimes physically unavoidable, and often unfairly applied—are ever-present, which highlights once again how the mobility of some obscures the immobility of others. Krige marshals sufficient evidence in the volume to declare that "the movement of knowledge embodied in people (and things) [is] a *social accomplishment.*"[11] This deliberately, even provocatively goes against the methodological trend towards acknowledging mobility as a given, be it in terms of the increasing fluidity of disciplinary boundaries or the re-framing of social reality around the transnational, international, and global. That crossing a border of any kind could be viewed as an accomplishment would seem to fly in the face of our post-Cold War era of internet pathways, cheap travel, study abroad, and tourist complacency. *How Knowledge Moves* explores the often hidden agendas of nation-states to determine what information is of national significance,

8. Ibid.

9. See Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London, 2012); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013).

10. John Krige, "Introduction: Writing the Transnational History of Science and Technology," in *How Knowledge Moves: Writing the Transnational History of Science and Technology*, ed. John Krige (Chicago, IL, 2019), 6.

11. Ibid, 5.

who the bearers of that information are, and under what circumstances that information may be transmitted abroad or held within national borders. According to Krige, mobility—unhindered, unobserved mobility—has always been an illusion, granted due to either privilege or disinterest. As soon as something or someone becomes of value to (principally) the nation state, mobility becomes a national security issue and restrictions ensue. Assumptions of declining barriers are no more than globalist delusions. The "race" between various national competitors to secure a Covid-19 vaccine, with all the associated prestige attached to it, once again shows how national prerogatives take precedence when global needs should be paramount.

Both Beck and Greenblatt did not want the nation-state to disappear as a "knowledge container"; they simply wanted to emphasize that it was a more porous unit—both epistemologically and physically—than had so far been presented. Krige goes a step further to illustrate how the powers to police and enforce borders have continued even in an era of apparent ultra-mobility. Cold War historians are of course familiar with talk of restricted mobility, and how "freedom of movement" was a central plank in the Helsinki Accords. But assumptions that the end of the Cold War would result in a globalized borderlessness were wide of the mark (and rather Eurocentric as well, as if the fall of the Berlin Wall would be universally replicated, which it was not). Borders have never gone away permanently, as even the borderless nations of the Benelux demonstrated during Spring 2020. And when one form of mobility—this time biological—triggers restrictions to control it, other forms of mobility—social, economic—will suffer further consequences.

Of course, there is a distinct difference between mobility across borders—which gets Krige's attention—and mobility *per se*. But the notion of mobility as social value and social accomplishment applies to all forms. This brings us to the issue of mobility and our universities. Primarily those institutions across the English-speaking world that have based their business plans on international student mobility are now facing considerable difficulties. Entire university budgets have been focused on building institutions to attract many of the one million or so Chinese students who traveled abroad every year, as well as the increasing numbers from India. In April 2020, Universities UK calculated a potential loss of £7 billion in 2020–2021 from international students who would now probably stay at home.[12] Knock-on effects will be felt as whatever remained of in-house research budgets are re-allocated to make up for some of the shortfall in tuition fees. Writing in May 2020 about the previous couple of months, Deborah Cohn and Hilary Kahn rightly stated in their defense of international education in general that "Mobility was and still is in suspended animation." Political scientist Patrick O'Meara expressed concern in the same article that "the new restrictions on physical mobility, which not only limit our ability to explore the world but prevent us from even leaving our homes, also threaten

12. "Coronavirus: Universities face a harsh lesson," *Financial Times*, April 25, 2020.

to usher in a new era of cultural and political isolationism."[13] The Dutch public intellectual Ko Colijn neatly summed this up with the term "Coronationalism," which he used to emphasize how a transnational threat against the collective good was instead being met with a hodge-podge of uncoordinated national responses, including the Covid vaccine "race."[14]

Covid has simply accelerated what was already there—academic mobility and internationalization were already facing challenges due to rising nationalism and chauvinism in recent years. The virus has definitely added extra incentives for prejudices to go public.[15] In these circumstances, it is striking that some commentators have been busy in making claims that physical mobility is going to be replaced by digital, and that universities need to orientate resources to accommodate this shift. Academic mobility as *physical movement* is then especially vulnerable to being declared outmoded, deemed replaceable by virtual alternatives, and no longer featuring as central in future business plans.

In an interview in May 2020, the former rector magnificus of Utrecht University, Bert van der Zwaan, connected the effects of Covid-19 with the shift in global power and scientific leadership from West to East, and from the United States and the European Union to China. Disruptions in international travel plus nationalist ambitions are combining to re-map the global routes of student mobility, with far less East-West interchange the expected result. For Van der Zwaan this heralds the true era of digitalization, because the international classroom, according to him, is not entirely dependent on physical mobility: "it is the right time to consider what internationalization truly means to higher education. It has often been seen as synonymous with mobility, but goes much further than that."[16] In saying this, Van der Zwaan brushes aside concerns that large-scale digital education cannot match the classroom variety, despite the clear results that we are all now receiving from student surveys on their experience of university education in 2020. Recent months have seen publishers throwing backlists online, accelerating the use of the e-book, and partially answering the problems caused by closed libraries. But archives are a different story, and most of us are still at the mercy of restricted or no opening times, disrupted research schedules, and uncertain deadlines. SHAFR's research-file-sharing initiative is a bold move to overcome this, but there is only so much it can compensate for. Van der Zwaan may regard mobility as passé, but ignoring its social value could have far-reaching consequences. The day

13. Deborah Cohn and Hilary Kahn, "International Education at the Coronavirus Crossroads," *global-e*, June 5, 2020, last accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/june-2020/international-education-coronavirus-crossroads.

14. Ko Colijn, "Coronationalisme," *Clingendael Spectator*, March 18, 2020, last accessed August 12, 2020, https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/coronationalisme.

15. Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit, "The new nationalism and internationalization of HE," *University World News*, September 17, 2017, last accessed August 7, 2020, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20170914073027157.

16. Van der Zwaan, "Universities around the globe."

before his interview was published, *Science Guide* reported on an advisory report submitted to the Dutch government on how to cut back on the higher education budget in the looming Covid-caused economic downturn. One of the options was the insistence on the Dutch language for all Bachelor programs, which would inevitably bring about a reduced number of international students from both within and outside the EU at Dutch universities. Reckoned to produce savings of €170 million, its adoption would effectively mean the end of the "international classroom" in the Netherlands.[17] Although this would be a heatedly drastic measure, there have already been political voices in the Dutch parliament attacking the prevalence of English in higher education, and if push comes to shove in a deep recession there would be few barriers to hold back a concerted nativist assault on academic internationalism. That would be Coronationalism of a profoundly recidivist variety, with deep implications not only for university business models, but also for the very significance of mobility within academia.

Mobility in all its varieties is obviously too big a subject to take on in an essay such as this. The intention here, in blending observations on research and teaching, has been fourfold: to point to how Covid-caused conditions have brought the social value of mobility to the fore; to signal that regarding mobility as a social accomplishment makes us aware of the taken-for-granted privileges that often lie behind it; to emphasize how mobility, despite its omnipresence in much of our work, is rarely addressed directly as a specific attribute; finally, to express concern that mobility, as a central assumption of our understanding of higher education and our task as academics, is now more politically and economically vulnerable and potentially reversible. At the time of writing campuses are already places of concern as universities attempt to re-introduce a semblance of normality for a younger generation who are often less accepting of restrictions. With health analysts saying that Covid may become endemic and never actually disappear, it is evident that there are going to be many long-term trade-offs in everyday life that we still need to prepare for. This may well lead us to reflect more on the centrality of mobility for our personal and professional life-worlds—even with a vaccine.

17. 'Kabinet brengt miljardenbezuiniging op hoger onderwijs in kaart,' *Science Guide*, April 30, 2020, last accessed August 12, 2020, https://www.scienceguide.nl/2020/04/kabinet-maakt-plannen-voor-miljarden-bezuinigingen-op-hoger-onderwijs/.