A mobility studies manifesto

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

First, mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense. Boarding a plane, venturing on a ship, climbing onto the back of a wagon, crowding into a coach, mounting on horseback, or simply setting one foot in front of the other and walking: these are indispensable keys to understanding the fate of cultures. The physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement – the available routes; the maps; the vehicles; the relative speed; the controls and costs; the limits on what can be transported; the authorizations required; the inns, relay stations and transfer points; the travel facilitators – are all serious objects of analysis. Only when conditions directly related to literal movement are firmly grasped will it be possible fully to understand the metaphorical movements: between center and periphery; faith and skepticism; order and chaos; exteriority and interiority. Almost every one of these metaphorical movements will be understood, on analysis, to involve some kinds of physical movement as well.

Second, mobility studies should shed light on hidden as well as conspicuous movements of peoples, objects, images, texts, and ideas. Here again it would be well to begin with the literal sense: moments in which cultural goods are transferred out of sight, concealed inside cunningly designed shells of the familiar or disguised by subtle adjustments of color and form. From here it is possible to move to more metaphorical notions of hiddenness: unconscious, unrecognized, or deliberately distorted mobility, often in response to regimes of censorship or repression. We can also investigate the cultural mechanisms through which certain forms of movement – migration, labor-market border-crossing, smuggling, and the like – are marked as “serious,” while others, such as tourism, theater festivals, and (until recently) study abroad, are rendered virtually invisible.

Third, mobility studies should identify and analyze the “contact zones” where cultural goods are exchanged. Different societies constitute these zones differently, and their varied structures call forth a range of responses from wonder and delight to avidity and fear. Certain places are characteristically set apart from inter-cultural contact; others are deliberately made open, with the rules suspended that inhibit exchange elsewhere. A specialized group of “mobilizers” – agents, go-betweens, translators, or intermediaries – often emerges to facilitate contact, and this group, along with the institutions that they serve, should form a key part of the analysis.

Fourth, mobility studies should account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraint. This tension cannot be resolved in any abstract theoretical way, for in given historical circumstances structures of power seek to mobilize some individuals and immobilize others. And it is important to note that moments in which individuals feel most completely in control may, under careful scrutiny, prove to be moments of the most intense structural determination, while moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be
precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement. Mobility studies should be interested, among other things, in the way in which seemingly fixed migration paths are disrupted by the strategic acts of individual agents and by unexpected, unplanned, entirely contingent encounters between different cultures.

Fifth, mobility studies should analyze the sensation of rootedness. The paradox here is only apparent: it is impossible to understand mobility without also understanding the glacial weight of what appears bounded and static. Mobility often is perceived as a threat – a force by which traditions, rituals, expressions, beliefs are decentered, thinned out, decontextualized, lost. In response to this perceived threat, many groups and individuals have attempted to wall themselves off from the world or, alternatively, they have resorted to violence.

Cultures are almost always apprehended not as mobile or global or even mixed, but as local. Even self-conscious experiments in cultural mobility, such as the ones we have described in these essays, turn out to produce results that are strikingly enmeshed in particular times and places and local cultures. And the fact that those local cultures may in fact be recent formations, constructed out of elements that an earlier generation would not have recognized, makes very little difference. Indeed one of the characteristic powers of a culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition. Certainly the pleasure, as well as the opacity, of culture has to do with its localness: this way of doing something (cooking, speaking, praying, making love, dancing, wearing a headscarf or a necklace, etc.) and not that. A study of cultural mobility that ignores the allure (and, on occasion, the entrapment) of