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Critical response to Special Section: international academic mobility

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A New Mobilities Paradigm?

Over the past two decades a range of spatial metaphors have emerged—from 'flows' to 'liquid modernity' and 'tipping points'—which simultaneously propel, and capture, the zeitgeist; a world of accelerated movements and disruptions of ideas, capital, people and information. Apart from the ideological, legal and regulatory shifts that have emerged to enhance mobility (in the name of free markets, globalisation, digitization), taken-for granted infrastructure systems are also being constructed that enable people and their ideas to travel at enhanced speed across space. These non-places of supermodernity, to use a phrase developed by Marc Auge (2009), not only function to facilitate mobility, but they also *signify* mobility.

'Mobility' is all the rage in the academy too. Universities—in all corners of the globe—are busy scoping, planning and advertising mobility programmes, as an essential component of academic's and student's learning experience, whilst governments and regional bodies around the world are promoting mobility as crucial to learning in the new global economy. The world is on the move, and if it is not, it ought to be - at least if we take the policy rhetoric seriously.

In a sign that Europe was willing to use a wide variety of rationales for enhancing mobility, beyond the programmes that have been in place since the late 1980s, the European Commission spent the Spring of 2008 laying the groundwork for a new 'freedom' – the movement of knowledge. In the words of EU Commissioner, Janez Potočnik, "Today's Europe is built on the four freedoms of goods, services, capital and people. The knowledge society of tomorrow needs the freedom, the freedom of movement of knowledge."

In 2009, the Council of the European Union placed 'mobility' at the top of its strategic objectives for education and training. Mobility is represented as "…an essential element of lifelong learning and an important means of enhancing people's employability and adaptability" (CoE, 2009: 3) whilst "Youth on the move"—is now one of four Flagship Initiatives in the European Commission's (2010) communication aimed at realizing a competitive and sustainable Europe by 2020. The strength of the commitment to mobility is

litmus in the fact that for learners, teachers and teacher trainers, mobility is to be "…the rule rather than the exception" (ibid), with a European Quality Charter for Mobility laying down the principles to ensure the quality of this learning experience.

Academic mobility is not just a European phenomenon. Within Asia, the regional body—the South East Asian Ministries of Education (SEAMEO)—launched a pilot mobility scheme in 2009 (The MIT Student Mobility Project) involving higher education institutions within the region - beginning with Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The purpose of the project is to scope the pathway for a regional integration strategy, with mobility an important mechanism to promote regional cooperation, and the mutual recognition of qualifications.

In the USA, on the other hand, the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* annual report for 2009 noted a record number of U.S. students choosing to study abroad. They note not only an increase of 8.5% from the year before, but there were four times as many U.S. students participating in study abroad in 2007/08 than in 1987/88. According to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Judith A. McHale, "Today more than ever before, study abroad can help our students to understand our interconnected world and to participate productively in the global economy" (Institute of International Education, 2009: 1). Notable in this report, however, were significant increases in the numbers of students going to China and India; an indication that new calculations were being made by institutions and families about the strategic importance of emerging centres of power in the world to their own academic futures and trajectories.

The outcomes of some academic mobility schemes, however, are often un- or under-stated; a strategy and sensibility that is represented as leading to 'understanding' and enhanced cooperation. When greater specification in policy does occur, as in the Communique´ from the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education (BFUG, 2009), mobility is viewed as producing 'effects' that range from enhancing the quality of programmes, to creating excellence in research, strengthening the academic and cultural internationalisation of European higher education, promoting personal development and employability, fostering respect for diversity, encouraging linguistic pluralism, and increasing cooperation *and* competition between higher education institutions (Ibid: 4). From this list,

mobility is conceived of as a positive force; a powerful mechanism of social change. However, statements like this are an overly romantic rendering of mobility. For instance, it is evident that greater academic mobility across Europe is *reducing* rather than increasing linguistic diversity; the result of the rapid growth of teaching in English to cope with the linguistic diversity in the classroom.

Researching Mobilities

Given the under-specification of mobility in policy discourses like those outlined above, it is tempting to think of 'mobility' talk as little more than a "…evocative keyword for the twenty-first century" (Hallam et al, 2006: 1); a fashionable slogan that will fade. However, as is clear from the intensifying focus in policy and programmes which I have briefly outlined above, and from the papers presented in this Special Issue, the idea of 'mobility' is also creating its own effects and contexts by being strategized, materialized, institutionalized and performed in a wide variety of ways.

Such developments have led social theorists, such as John Urry and Mimi Sheller (Sheller and Urry, 2006), to argue that mobility projects are generating deep changes in our social formations. However, as Johanna Fahey and Jane Kenway argue in their Introduction in this Special Issue, *how* we research and understand mobility as an object of intellectual inquiry has been much slower off the mark.

This state of affairs is beginning to change. In 2006, a new academic journal, *Mobilities*, was launched, with the lead editorial calling for debate and new approaches to research which might inform the 'mobility turn'.

Similarly, as Fahey and Kenway observe, the earlier paradigms have not sufficiently considered the epistemological, ontological or ethical issues associated with the new forms of international academic mobility. A series of framings are at issue here. In other words, how might we challenge, and change, those framings which have privileged: (i) linear

understandings of the direction of *movement* (as in 'brain drain/brain gain' framings of skilled migration); (ii) neo-classical accounts of *knowledge* being moved (as human capital); (iii) the *spatiality* of movement (as self-enclosed territorial containers reducible to the nation state); and (iv) the *sociality* of movement (as a good thing for everyone; cosmopolitanism).

Challenging these kinds of framings means asking questions such as: *What are we to make of mobility as a social and political project for the academy, and as a way of thinking about wider transformations in the spatial, infrastructural, and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities? What alternative concepts and intellectual resources can we bring to bear on the study of mobilities that move our analyses beyond simple human capital accounts, on the one hand, and an overly romantic engagement with movement, on the other? What are the ethical and social justice issues which are raised when mobilities are caught up in the power geometries of everyday life?* These kinds of questions are also at the heart of this Special Issue on academic mobility that the contributors explore.

Revealing the Complexities of Academic Im/mobilites

Though the studies are very different from one another other, in their own ways, they touch upon three themes that I want to pull out and develop a little further.

A conceptual language

First, as Fahey and Kenway's Introduction makes clear, one of the greatest difficulties in opening up 'mobilities' to more critical investigation is because the idea of movement itself has been captured by zero-sum, linear, approaches to movement as migration, and to human capital and nation-state accounts of the implications of these movements for the availability of knowledge and skills to the (nation's) labour market. And while more recent developments in these field of research have resulted in analyses that turn brain drain into other possibilities, such as 'gain' and 'circulation' through movements back and forth via remittances, networks, and other forms of knowledge exchange, there continues to be a strong human capital framing which, in turn, views the subject as an economic agent. Missing in this kind of account are ways of thinking about subjects as active social and

political agents, negotiating, interpreting, contesting their social worlds by mobilizing and materializing the *knowledges* (hence knowledge as plural) through which that social world is constituted.

Yang and Welch do recognise a more complex, calculative, social subject as their mobile academic. However they also assume that the subjectivities of these Chinese-born academics in an Australian university continue to be shaped by a deeply-embedded notion of 'the Chinese diaspora', alerting us to the performative work these nationally-inscribed discourses continue to have (as other) on theory work as well. Reading the interview data on Chinese-born academics in Sydney presented to us by Yang and Welch, we do not have a strong sense of the 'diaspora as enclave' at work in the ways in which writers like Portes (1998) describe, and the thick ties that hold them together, and which also link them to their previous homeland.

This did get me thinking about much of the academic mobility we witness today, particularly in the form of international students, some of whom are likely to be the kinds of interviewees in Yang and Welch's study. The reason for their mobility is highly individual (study, pursue a career opportunity, need a job), and not the consequences of the social networks that feed the ethnic enclaves and niches. Their ties to each other, and to their homelands, are likely to be much weaker because they are outside the social networks—whether weakly (Granovetter, 1974) or strongly tied (Lin et al, (1981)—that also function as a resource which links them across territorial spaces.

Fahey and Kenway's two essays seek to avoid the epistemological traps this approach brings. By making explicit the power inherent in knowledge, as in knowledge/power, and locating these movements in a global world of complex, polymorphic, multi-scalar regulatory geographies (Brenner, 2004), we see the very different ways in which academic knowledges are negotiated and practiced. Fahey and Kenway do this by developing a conceptual language to talk about mobile academics, where 'knowledge as power' and 'mobility as resource' are simultaneously shaped by particular spatialities, temporalities and socialities (Robertson, 2010). Fahey and Kenway's use of 'empires of knowledge' and 'edges of empires', when coupled with a narrative methodology, open up a very different way of seeing the mobile

academic through the interplay of multiple movements and points of fixity, of knowledges that are accreted and acquired, of spatialities that are woven into a complex and tangled mosaic of nodes and scales, and socialities that are the outcome of old and new inclusions and exclusions. Throughout knowledge is viewed as ways of coming to know worlds, and therefore constitutive. As Hannam et al remark, it is not a question of privileging the mobile subject, but rather of "tracking the power and politics of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and status" (2006: 4). What Fahey and Kenway's conceptual work adds to this 'tracking' is a way of framing, and focusing upon, an academic's movements (and frictions) within, and across, the different (political) terrains of academic knowledge production.

Academic mobility as a resource

Second, mobility is viewed as resource for the academic, but one with the potential to enable (as in Terri Kim's conception of how 'transnational' is mobilised as a form of academic capital), to disrupt, or to silence actions. Much clearly depends on the wider historical, social and political contexts and relations in which the mobile academics finds themselves, and on the particular histories and biographies of these actors. For some of Yang and Welch's interviewees, academic mobility and their new location in a high status Australian university, has enabled these academics of Chinese origin to live in an environment and have a style of academic life (uncomplicated social relations; academic freedom; no Guanxi; better access to networks in the US and Europe and so on) felt to be not possible in China —at least by the older interviewees. However, Yang and Welch note, the younger Chinese academics seem to have a rather different view of their return to China, likely mediated by their sense of recent developments and newer opportunities to be pursued in China.

Yang and Welch embrace the idea of a circulation of knowledges in the Chinese diaspora in order to contribute to China's scientific community, on the one hand, and to China's ongoing development project, on the other. However in reading their account, it seemed to me that these circulations were mediated by a topography of different frictions which the interviewees themselves pointed to: limited networks; ambivalent attitudes; difficult to detect opportunities; attitudes toward research collaborations, and so on. In other words, Yang and

Welch's paper also suggests that academics who have been mobile at some point in their lives (perhaps as international students who have not returned to their places of departure) are not necessarily able to, or willing to, generate movements of knowledges over spaces. Rather, a range of 'movement' mechanisms would need to be put into play, and cultural shifts engineered, that might in turn enable the easier movement of knowledges across spaces and time. This point is also made by Louise Ackers (2005: 313) with regard to the Marie Curie scheme that operates in Europe. The scheme operated through, and substantiated existing networks, as well as playing a key role in developing new contacts. In short, she argues, the scheme helped to lubricate and strengthen networks.

Nor do Yang and Welch raise the highly political issue of *what knowledge* circulates – and the implications of this position for a more confident China seeking to counter what they view as a century of humiliation (Jacques, 2009). However, this is definitely an issue revealed in Fahey and Kenway's fascinating narrative of leading Australian sociologist and intellectual, Anna Yeatman, and her time in New Zealand. I recognised aspects of Yeatman's account as a consequence of my own academic experience at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, in the 1990s. The circulation of Western knowledges and practices were regarded as highly problematic, particularly with the academy viewed by the indigenous Maori as a key means of perpetuating old forms of imperialism (Smith, 1999).

Frictions (and immobilities) are also generated in the other ways, as Leemann's paper on Swiss higher education policy and practice, reveals. The consequences of a highly institutionalized approach to transnational mobility, particularly as a resource that has 'value' and 'counts' in negotiating academic careers, shows the ways in which the capacity to be mobile, or not, determines ongoing opportunities in the labour market, and in the trajectory of careers. Leemann's insists we view mobility, not as a social experience whose value is neutral, but an experience that has value precisely because it can be drawn into fields of asymmetrical gendered relations and thus the reproduction of male power. As Ahmed (2004: 153) notes, "…the idealization of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as not free in the same way". In other words, mobility is a resource, or source of capital, to which not everyone has

an equal relationship. In Leemann's case, it is female academics with family commitments, or female academics whose careers are viewed as less critical than their (male partner).

Terri Kim, however, offers us a different way of thinking about 'frictions'; those that arise from the way in which some mobile academics experience, and value, being an 'outsider' or 'stranger', and use this status and experience productively to shape their own intellectual endeavours and career trajectories. However these 'outsider' statuses and perspectives are not always directly the result of mobility, as Kim reveals in her focus on English-based cultural theorist, Stuart Hall. His 'outsider' status had early beginnings in his Jamaican family ("I was the blackest member of my family"). However for Kim, we are left in little doubt that for Hall, the accretions of outsider experiences fed into Hall's way of looking at the world, and his ongoing intellectual and political project.

An ethics of mobility

Finally, Fahey and Kenway's concluding essay points to a little raised issue in the more recent work on mobility; of an ethics of mobility. In part drawing from longer standing theoretical and political concerns about the affects of mobility on those left behind, and on the knowledges and skills (as resources) that travel, Fahey and Kenway ask us to think through the complex politics of arrivals, departures and responsibilities that mobility entails. It is an ethic that is clearly of concern to some of Yang and Welch's interviewees—and indeed Yang and Welch themselves; about how to understand, and contribute back, the academic knowledge that their mobility has enabled. It is an ethic, too, that Kim identifies when she argues that being a stranger enables mobile academics to bring to their new locations a lens that in turn enables a political reading of place and its socialites and relations of power. From here, political projects can be launched, even if these are aimed at understanding of what an 'ethics of being a stranger' entail – as observer rather than orchestrator.

There is much work to be done …still

Mobility is being mobilized (and fetishized) by policymakers and families as an essential experience for all learners and teachers. Yet, as this Special Issue has revealed, we have limited ways of understanding what is entailed in this experience of academic mobility. There is a great deal at stake, however, for such movements are never, have never been, neutral. The romance of movement and mobility ought to be the first clue that this is something we ought to be particularly curious about.

There is much work to be done in this area of mobility in the academy (academics and students) if we are to develop a programme of research on mobilities and immobilities that takes it beyond economic accounts of remittances, important as these resources are. Such a programme of enquiry needs to engage conceptually and methodologically. Hand in hand with this programme of research must go a praxis; an ethics of mobility which helps us anchor mobility in a world where social relations and social responsibilities are key to developing more cohesive and equitable globally-stratified societies. These are important challenges for an emerging field of research.

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