
Thematic Section

Changes of Place: Interrogating the Continuities and Disjunctures of Movement

Introduction

Vered Amit *Concordia University*
Karen Fog Olwig *University of Copenhagen*

Efforts to account for processes of continuity and change have long posed quintessential and perennial challenges for social and cultural anthropology as they have for its sister social sciences. Indeed the difficulties in meeting this challenge have been key factors in precipitating the succession of various more or less expansive theoretical paradigms. In this special issue, we approach this open-ended terrain from a focus on movement, a vantage point that is at once selective and yet still wide-ranging. It is probably not surprising that movement has often been construed as fundamentally inscribing change since it requires shifts through space and time. Yet from Marcel Mauss (1973) to Tim Ingold (2004), theorists have also noted that walking, one of the oldest and most fundamental forms of movement, marks out taken for granted cultural continuities even as it effects historical transformations:

When the same paths are repeatedly trodden, especially by heavy boots, the consequences may be quite dramatic amounting in places to severe erosion. Surfaces are indeed transformed. But these are surfaces *in* the world, not the surface *of* the world. Indeed strictly speaking, the world has no surface. Human beings live in the world, not on it, and as beings in the world the historical transformations they effect are part and parcel of the world's transformation of itself. [Ingold 2004:333]

In his discussion of the evolution of walking, Ingold draws attention to the way in which forms of movement came to be distinguished from each other in terms of dimensions of social class, destination and technologies of transport. These kinds of social distinctions have also been echoed in the tendency to parcel out various forms of movement—local perambulations, tourism, migration, diplomatic, military, business or student travel—as the province of different fields of scholarly investigation. But this compartmentalization, while never entirely convincing,

has become blurred as the number of people moving long distances, the overlaps between different impetuses for, regimes and modalities of movement, as well as the far flung connections afforded by new forms of communication and transport technologies have all increased. At the same time, the distinctions Ingold, as well as many others, noted still have their contemporary socioeconomic referents. Our aim in compiling this diverse collection of studies is therefore neither to collapse the differences between different forms of movement, nor to allow them to overly determine the limits on how we encompass and comprehend spatial mobility. Mobility of one kind or another often focuses a more acute and self-conscious spotlight on disjunctures and persistences that are also experienced or insisted on both by more sedentary individuals as well as by people engaged in other forms of movement. Hence an examination of various forms of movement usefully throws open for interrogation broader processes and paradigms that extend well beyond the particular instance or type of journey.

The Life Course and Movements

Positing a relationship between age or life phase and mobility has been a longstanding feature of studies of movement. A noteworthy example of this has been the frequent observation by migration scholars that young adults are the most likely to be involved in long distance migration because they have the “least invested in terms of jobs and career at home” and the most time to recoup their “investment in migration” (Martin 2007:7). But this primary focus on one particular phase in the life course has changed as the construction of migration has shifted.

Earlier scholarship tended to represent migration as a singular movement between two stable places, with a consequent focus either on the factors mobilizing the *recruitment* of migrants in one locale or on those shaping their *reception* at another. Over the last 15 years, much greater attention has been paid to the transnational fields and ongoing social connections created as people move across space (Basch et al. 1994). One of the effects of this shift has been increasing recognition that migration is rarely singular but that it often involves a series of moves: from the countryside to the city, within geopolitical regions, across state and regional borders, visits back and forth across dispersed social networks, return migration and so on. The onus thus shifts away from a presumption of stable places from which migrants embark or disembark, towards ethnographic studies of moving people who construct and *reconstruct* places, social relations and social contexts in the course of and through their ongoing experiences of movement (Werbner 1999).

This fluidity of places and social relations is brought out in Marianne Holm Pedersen’s analysis of Iraqi refugee women in Denmark. It shows how the women came to realize that their Iraqi family and country of origin, which they regarded as firm foundations of identification and belonging, are in fact changeable entities. The women became aware of this when, after years of being settled in Denmark, the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime allowed them at last to pay a return visit to their family and place of origin in Iraq. This experience elicited reassessments of the status and quality of personal networks in both Iraq and in Denmark as well as poignant questions about belonging. The Iraqi case underscores the close relationship between “being” and “belonging.” While the two notions can be distinguished analytically (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), it is easier to separate them when dealing with more abstract contexts of belonging than when considering the continuous reshaping of social relations and attachment to place that occurs in the course of everyday life.

The role of the home as a place of belonging and achievement is a central theme in Heather Horst’s treatment of Jamaican return migration. For returnees, building a respectable home was a manifestation of their success in the migration destination as well as in the country of origin. Thus, construction of a home became a “rite of passage” whereby they sought to reconnect with their society of origin while maintaining a sense of continuity in relation to the lives they had built abroad. This became of critical importance as the returnees realized the difficulties of establishing the kind of life in Jamaica that they had dreamed of as migrants abroad and began to feel the loss of children and grandchildren left behind in the migration destination.

If migration has always involved moves across both space and time, one could then argue that an earlier literature privileged a focus on spatial aspects whereas more recent work has rebalanced our attention toward a more evenhanded treatment of temporal as well as spatial dimensions. It is therefore not surprising to find that recording life histories has become an increasingly prominent part of research on migration and has helped to extend our notion of how movement is positioned and repositioned over the life course (Olwig 2007). In this issue, Karen Fog Olwig’s repeated encounters, over the course of 20 years, with the members of a family that had emigrated from the island of Nevis to the American Virgin Islands provide telling illustrations of the ways in which the stated motivations for migration “undergo constant revision and reassessment, as individuals take stock of their lives at various points in their lives and reconsider

the ambitions and goals that have guided their life as migrants.”

But the dialectic between movement and the life course need not only involve an ongoing appraisal of mobility; it can also mould conceptions and experience of the life course itself. Certain forms of movement may be identified with particular life phases or transitions and plans for mobility or travel may shape the life course long before the actual move is made. As described by Noel Dyck in this issue, the hope of eventually winning an athletic scholarship to attend an American college or university is increasingly reshaping the childhoods of many young Canadian high performing amateur athletes. Eventual retirement to the sunny climes of Spain was a longstanding aspiration for many of the British migrants that Caroline Oliver encountered in the Costa del Sol. By contrast, Vered Amit reports that despite official discourses about travel as part of career formation, young Canadians taking up opportunities for temporary work or study abroad may simply be seeking a break before settling down to a form of adulthood that they seem to regard as otherwise inevitable. On the other hand, Nadia Giguère describes how what was initially intended to be a short term experience of volunteer work in Calcutta became a fundamental turning point in the life plans of some European visitors, leading to long term involvements in India, new careers, transnational connections and relationships. All of these cases feature a dedifferentiation between different forms of mobility with overlaps or convergences between tourism, migration and student travel: tourists dream of retiring to their vacation getaway; volunteer visitors find themselves settling in the country in which they expected to be only temporarily resident; youths seek work or study opportunities that will allow them to tour abroad.

But it is the much poorer and more marginalized women, with whom Hanne Mogensen conducted fieldwork in eastern Uganda, who are the most mobile of all the people featured in this issue. Over the course of their youths, adulthoods and even impending deaths, the daily routines of Catherine and her sisters were constituted around constant moves in search of the kind of support from relatives or the types of temporary jobs that would enable them to carry on and stay alive. As Mogensen points out, it is this constant movement that “ensures some kind of continuity in their lives and in their living standard.” Here it is life itself and the hope of a future, which is at stake in the pursuit of an unceasing round of movement. Between the assurance of young Canadian travellers that they will be able to settle down when they choose, and Catherine’s longing for a place to settle, lies a world of unequal motion.

Changes of Place and Improvisation

Catherine and her sisters were constantly improvising, opportunistically searching out support, contact and assistance that might provide them with a place to stay, a job, business capital, a lover, a friend. But smaller or greater improvisations feature in all the cases included here. Helena, Kevin and their children responded to the shifting circumstances of their settlement in the American Virgin Islands by revising again and again their hopes for improvement and the provision they made for jobs, homes and education. Alienated by the invasion of holiday homeowners to his village in the English countryside, John and his wife moved to a Spanish village where people still “help each other out.” But like a number of their fellow British expatriate retirees, when they became older and more fragile, they decided to leave Spain. In their case, they elected not to return to the U.K. but to join their children who were living in New Zealand.

In all of these cases, therefore, people improvise as opportunities present themselves and change their strategies, plans and arrangements when circumstances change. This capacity for improvisation is hardly peculiar to people moving about and would surely have featured in the lives of all the people described in this volume, regardless of whether or not they had moved away from their natal homes or countries. But improvisation and change is thrown into sharper relief by the experience of movement. In part, this is because people move to effect change or in response to change. At the very least, movement holds open the possibility of enabling a *change of place* in the sense of a new locality or social position. It can hold open the chance for self-improvement, the promise of escape from the social norms and obligations of one locality in moving to another, or a chance to combine the elements of different contexts. Among the European expatriates, on whom Nadia Giguère focused, an initial experience of volunteering in Calcutta provoked fundamental reorientations in their outlooks and life plans. Yet these volunteers did not persist with the kind of humanitarian work that elicited this life-altering shift, instead they subsequently sought out new projects in India that they found more personally satisfying and hopeful. And while they came to feel alienated from their Western backgrounds, in various ways they were also all able to draw on the privileges that came from their status as expatriate Europeans in Calcutta, or from the transnational connections that provided financial support for their projects.

Even when movement may appear to lead to limited mobility, as gauged by standard social and economic

indicators, the broader spectrum of contexts made available through movement provides new opportunities for social positioning. The Nevisian family members were thus able to present themselves as successful by highlighting particular aspects of their achievements abroad, such as the building of a large house, generous remittances to family left behind or high moral standards. But movement is more than just a gateway to possible changes. Mobility is in itself necessarily improvisational and even when it is undertaken as part of familiar and well entrenched traditions, requires some inventiveness when the unexpected inevitably occurs. So a focus on movement draws our attention to the capacities, contexts and scope for improvisation.

Hanging onto Paradigms

But for all of the disjunctures and improvisations that are necessarily vested in changes of place, one of the most striking aspects of the cases included in this collection is the unwillingness expressed by many of the protagonists to abandon the key paradigms that framed their movements. This seems to be the case even when many of their experiences appear to contradict important aspects of the premises they continue to claim. The recruitment of middle-class Canadian students to American university athletic programs relies on the students' and their parents' willingness to overlook or ignore the controversies and contradictions that have dogged these kinds of programs for decades. In spite of the exhaustion of constant practice, the social and financial costs, the difficulties of and shortfalls entailed in reconciling competing athletic and academic demands, most of the students continued to insist that their American educational experience had "been worth it." The Jopadhola of Uganda continue to insist on their adherence to a patrilineal kinship system in which a woman completely transfers from her father's to her husband's clan even though an increasing number of women have been divorced or never married, had children out of wedlock, and continue moving from one relative to another. British retirees who have moved to Spain continue to assert that the move has involved a radical change in lifestyle even though they have helped to recreate an imported British lifestyle, English lingua franca and associated amenities on the Costa del Sol. Having sought a different and better way of life by moving, they are determined that their experience in Spain has been as radically transformative as they hoped.

Why, then, given evidence to the contrary, do people insist on the continued salience of particular paradigms of family, life course, education and self-improvement that framed their movement? It may be that in some instances,

people have few alternatives and little power to challenge prevailing tenets. The movements of Catherine and her sisters are a living testament to crucial changes in the Ugandan institutional and urban landscape but they have few resources or incentives to challenge an idealized version of clan solidarity on which they are drawing—albeit selectively—in claiming support from relatives. In other words, the improvisations of some people on the go may be, to use de Certeau's distinction (1984), a matter of tactics rather than strategic calculations. However creative or indomitable, these improvisations still may be tightly circumscribed within broader representations and value systems.

But in many of the cases described in this collection of articles, there is no overriding social pressure necessitating either the move itself or a particular tenet attached to it. Here the insistence on certain paradigms may be tied to the longer-term investment that the migrant or traveller has placed in a particular construction of movement. As Noel Dyck explains in his paper, the acceptance of an American athletic scholarship is often tied to a long held set of aspirations refracted through a particular regime of community sports, coaching and parenting. To admit, even to oneself, that the experience did not live up to these expectations is to call into question a whole childhood of personal and family investment in a particular ideal of accomplishment and coming of age. British retirees often dreamed of an eventual new chapter in the sun long before they were actually able to make the move to Spain. European visitors were drawn to volunteer in a humanitarian project in Calcutta because it seemed to provide an opportunity to actualize long held humanitarian or religious ideals. In other words, we cannot view the paradigmatic lens through which people account for their travels only in terms of the move and its immediate aftermath. Rather, these moves have to be contextualized within a much longer history of investment in a particular rationale or aspirations for movement. People's sense of themselves, of their past and future, and of their most intimate personal connections, can be as bound up with the way in which they locate their travels as the move itself. Hence, there is much more at stake for many travellers in reframing their moves than just acknowledging that things have not necessarily worked out as they had imagined.

But there may also be reasons for "hanging on" that are vested in the nature of the changes and improvisations exigent upon movement itself. It may be easier to move, to accept larger or smaller changes and separation from loved ones and familiar places if some key tenets and values are seen to be retained. The willingness of young Canadians to seek opportunities for study or work

abroad even when this may involve quitting a “good job” was likely buttressed by their seeming assurance that adulthood itself would not be affected by this mobility and that in due course they would be able to settle down to a stable job, family and home. Umm Ali and other refugee Iraqi women in Copenhagen held onto the continued importance of an idealized version of family relations and support for many years during which they could not visit their country of origin. It was therefore probably difficult to give up altogether on this construction of family even when a visit to Iraq brought home to Umm Ali how much she had come to depend on a network of friends in Denmark and how distant her sense of connection to close relatives in Iraq had become. Many Jamaican migrants had been sustained by a vision of their island of origin as the true home to which they would be able to return after many years of labour in a distant migration destination. If this vision could not be realized by the returnees, in the broader sense of experiencing a sense of belonging in Jamaican society as such, it could be fulfilled by building, furnishing and decorating a house where they felt at home.

In an account of Luo urban migration in East Africa during the 1970s, David Parkin (1978) argued that continued adherence to the perpetuation of key cultural institutions could gloss over the significant social changes that these concepts had come to encompass. In other words, continued adherence to certain indexical concepts may sometimes enable people to be more comfortable with a measure of improvisation and change than an open challenge to treasured principles. In some cases therefore, the basis for change may be the reassurance, even if somewhat contrived, of the continued solidity of key institutions and paradigms.

The ethnographic analyses presented in this issue point to no simple conclusions. They show that movement leads to junctures as well as disjunctures; entails well-planned strategies as well as improvised tactics; and involves ongoing, complexly interwoven, negotiations of being and belonging as well as personhood. Movement clearly cannot be accounted for in terms of well-structured chains of cause and effect, but must be approached as an integral part of social life and the varying life trajectories in time and space that it implicates.

Vered Amit, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W., H-1125-44, Montréal, Québec, H3G 1M8, Canada. E-mail: v amit@alcor.concordia.ca.

Karen Fog Olwig, Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, 1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark. E-mail: karen.fog.olwig@anthro.ku.dk.

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