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TOWARDS A GLOBAL MOBILITIES DATABASE: RATIONALE AND CHALLENGES

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Towards a Global Mobilities Database: Rationale and Challenges

Ettore Recchi

'Mobility' is perhaps the keyword of our age. Less bombastic than 'globalization' and less poetic than 'liquidity', mobility captures the factual and observable nature of humanity's changing interrelationships. Globalization is premised on the movement of goods, capital and persons across national borders. Zygmunt Bauman's liquid society (2013) is predicated on individuals' rapid shifts from one social attribute or attitude to another. All changes are, indeed, manifestations of mobility. And given the variety of potential social actors involved and the multiplicity of spaces of action, it is wise to use a plural form. Ours is the epoch of mobilities.

Such a claim is not new. Indeed, mobilities have attracted the attention of many social and political theorists over the last decades. Some of them, like John Urry (2007), have even advocated a 'mobility turn' in the social sciences. In spite of this plea, empirical research on mobilities has remained either too metaphorical or overly compartmentalized. True, there are rigorous data-driven studies on different forms of migration, asylum-seeking, student mobility, tourism, commuting, ethnic diasporas, virtual friendships, online interactions... But it is rare for simultaneous and integrated studies to be carried out, examining the wide spectrum of human mobility practices. To address this knowledge gap, as part of the Global Mobilities Project, we intend to set up a *Global Mobilities Database (GMD)*, collecting information on a large palette of spatial mobilities.

For the sake of precision, we focus on *physical space* (the corporeal world) and *virtual space* (cyberspace), leaving out mobilities in symbolic spaces (like social mobility, which occurs in a purely theoretical occupational structure). In fact, physical and virtual mobilities both have a capacity to connect people and to generate socially significant experiences contingent on human interactions.

We also concentrate on *cross-border* mobilities. This is not to neglect intra- and sub-national movements, but any measurement needs a scale and – given the primacy of States as the political building bricks of the international order – cross-

border movements stand out as most problematic in global terms. Their impact is puzzling and their regulation controversial. Whatever the individual reasons and goals of border-crossings, population movements represent a source of global tensions, tensions that are growing.

Conceptually, our standpoint is that international mobility has a wider compass than migration, which – in line with the UN’s official definition – designates resettlement from one country to another for a period of no less than a year. Migration is, thus, only a subset of all possible cross-border movements in geographical space. Indeed, it is enough to question passengers on most international flights, trains or buses to find out that migrants are a minority of the mobile population.

GMD will cover the demographic, economic, sociological and legal-political dimensions of human mobility. The *demographic* dimension will contain information on intra-country travel flows– that is, the number of trips from country X to country Y (and *vice versa*). The *economic* database will record the average cost of individual travels from country to country. The *sociological* database will refer to what has come to be known as ‘social transnationalism’ (Mau 2010), that is cross-border social relations. These have been greatly facilitated and enhanced by the internet and manifest themselves largely – albeit not exclusively – through virtual connections (email, online chats and social network contacts). The *legal-political* layer of the database targets the state requirements for access to a given country on the basis of diverse foreign citizenships.

An essential component of GMD is its diachronic structure. Initially, due to limitations in access to earlier data, GMD is to include information from the beginning of the twenty-first century onwards.

The database is meant to be open source for researchers, for the informed public and for policy-makers. It will provide fact-based responses to questions about the world we live in and the way the world has changed since the beginning of the millennium. GMD may lend itself to:

1. Describing the world we live in and the trends that transform it;
2. Exploring the correspondences, and possibly the interaction, between different forms of mobility;
3. Unravelling the association between mobility and other social, political, economic and cultural trends;

4. Eliciting and testing hypotheses about the causes and the consequences of human mobilities.

Broadly speaking, the GMD permits us to address, in an unprecedented and robust way, a number of overarching questions: Where, when, why and in what respect is the world (or some parts of it) becoming progressively more or less mobile? Do international mobilities change in size and geographical distribution over time? Are there 'blocs' (that is, world regions) that are defined by the intensity of the mobilities that traverse them? Are different forms of mobilities correlated or disconnected? Do some types of international human mobilities anticipate others; for instance, stronger demographic links between countries premise future social-transnational links?

Hypothetical drivers of mobility are numerous. GMD could be applied to better understand the effects of changing border control policies, economic cycle phases and technological diffusion in a given country and in a given period. Or GMD could be linked to data about demographic or value configurations: for instance, do mobilities characterize younger countries or countries where people are less satisfied about national political institutions?

Last but not least, we need to emphasize that GMD is ideologically neutral as a social science enterprise. We do not take the side of the advocates of international mobility (like *The Economist*, who celebrates migration as a cure for globalization's ills: "Globalisation losers: What to do? One answer is to help people move", October 21st, 2017), or its enemies, who see it as a threat to community life (think of Robert Putnam's *Bowling alone* [2001]), or a plot against working-class solidarity (see Wolfgang Streeck's unease with the free movement of labor [2014]). Rather, we invite supporters of these views to capitalize on GMD and to test their hypotheses or refine their ideas on the basis of empirical evidence, exploiting research to enhance the common good.

The world we will inherit depends on a firmer grasp of the scope, causes and effects of human mobilities. It is worth trying to understand these mobilities better.

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