

Nomadic Sedentariness: the right to mobility and the right to stillness

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Throughout history, throughout the thousands and thousands of years that Man has occupied the planet Earth, human beings have resembled plants more than birds. Just as plants, his scarce mobility was conditioned by a strong rooting which made him stay put in a particular point in space. It is true that the roots could spread around the subsoil so as to absorb water or the necessary minerals to survive. It is also true that the leaves could grow upwards in search of the light from the sun, an essential element in the vital process of photosynthesis. However, despite these slight movements, or maybe due to the fact that he was aware of this, the human-plant has never stopped dreaming of becoming a human-bird and enjoying a life in freedom.

There are three types of *mobility* and two types of *movements*. Human mobility may be biological, mechanical and electronic. *Biological mobility* is based on the organisms own movement capabilities. Indeed, men are not plants, and we can walk or run to move about our space. This is what we have been doing for centuries. It shouldn't take us by surprise, therefore, that at an average speed of four kilometres an hour, and having to bear in our own body the pain of fatigue and physical tiredness, the scope of our movements was, in fact, quite limited. In the end, man was nothing but a plant in a pot that could, eventually, be placed in another spot close by. Thus, the human being soon realized the possibility of using the movement capabilities of other organisms, whether it was horses or camels. The average speed of some of these animals was faster than Man's speed, and, without a doubt, their physical resistance was also much higher. But in addition to these advantages, using animals for mobility also had another key advantage. Riding on the back of a donkey or a horse, Man liberated himself from the pain and fatigue associated to spatial movement. Transferring human pain onto animals significantly increased the radius of mobility. Nonetheless, animal pain also imposed certain limits. In the end, animal mobility is just as organic as human mobility. We are talking about a mere instrumentalization of another human being.

Man also realized from very early on the possibility of using other resources offered by Mother Nature. The mechanical force of the wind, exercised on the wide surface of a sail attached though a mast to a boat was enough to move across a body of water without causing pain to anyone. However, these natural forces, as whimsical as Nature itself, do not easily let themselves be subdued to Man's wishes. The wind blows when it wants to, with whatever intensity it feels like and in whatever direction it deems appropriate. Therefore, and being very correct, we shall say that mechanical mobility appears when Man is capable of applying a mechanical source of energy to movement and effectively controlling it. When this happened, i.e., when the steam engine was invented and, subsequently, the engine powered by chemical fuels, is when we witnessed a real revolution. The power of steam and fuel not only considerably widened the radius of mobility, but also freed us from the sacrifice and physical fatigue associated to movement. The steam boat, the railway and the car constitute technological milestones of this revolution. These powerful mechanical sources of energy allowed a load capacity and an average speed which were unthinkable until that point. The railway can transport people through great distances, and, above all, it can transport great quantities of freight. Thus, from this point onwards there are two possible alternatives: I can go looking for wheat or, if I have wheat delivered here, I can stay in this very place. Both alternatives may seem functionally equivalent, but very few people see that the modern city, a civilized form of sedentariness, is actually sustained by a huge movement of freight capable of supplying a big population, population who practically stays anchored and crowded in the same place.

Thus, the railway allows us to move through our space, but, undoubtedly and maybe even paradoxically, its greatest achievement is that, even without moving, we may obtain things originated at a great distance, i.e. without moving we can make that which is far away become close by. If the sole purpose of our trip was to get wheat, it will always be more convenient to have the wheat delivered and stay put. In other words, why should we move when with a simple stretch of our arm we can reach for

an apple? Despite all this, there are many things in this world out of our hand's reach. And it is then that we once again return to our dream of being birds. Even if it's just a low flight, the car is an invention specifically designed for the free movement of people. Ideally, one car per person. It can cover great distances, at a fast average speed, allowing for a great freedom of movements. Back to being paradoxical, the car, which at the beginning allowed us to freely move about our space, has restructured our world to such an extent that we now find it a necessity to move. When we think about the individual effect, it seems like the car allows us to get nearer to that which is far away. From a structural point of view, the car has also had the effect of moving further away that which, otherwise, could be within our reach. It moves us closer to our work, although in truth our work seems to be too far away. We can return to our home town to visit the family, although it is quite possible that without cars our place of residence would be much closer to this family. The car has reshaped the world to such an extent that forced mobility, i.e. the pure and simple instrumental mobility, increasingly occupies more of our time and more of our life. While the work-mobility constitutes a paradigm of forced mobility, the tourism-mobility constitutes the paradigm of the wished mobility. However, in this case need and wish are coupled: as the capability to move further away increases, so does the distance to which we wish to travel. The individual of our mechanical civilization lives in a super-fragmented space, made up of vital islands, very far away among each other, which he must necessarily connect with very high doses of spatial mobility. This is the essence of the nomadic sedentariness which characterizes us as members of a civilization based on spatial mobility.

Electronic mobility constitutes the third type of mobility available to human beings. The nature of this kind of mobility differs from the previous two in that it cannot transfer tangible things from one place to another. Thus, it can neither transport freight, nor human beings. However, and being a bit more precise, it does operate through the transfer of micro matter, and through the perception of transported micro matter. There is a natural mobility linked to our senses. When a human being smells a bouquet of flowers, or hears the murmur of a distant waterfall, or watches at dusk the sun setting over the horizon, in no event are his perceptions independent from the movement of matter. Certain travelling particles stimulate our sense of smell, our hearing and our sight. When one human being talks to another, matter is being moved. Otherwise, it would be impossible to hear him. It has always been like this, at least until humans started to think of ideas to reach further away. Smoke signals, the strum of drums, the sparkles produced by a mirror from the top of a watchtower are all pioneer developments. When the telegraph was invented, however, we see the true scope, potential and dimension of this logic based in the movement of micro matter, paradoxically in the movement of electrons. Electrons are very small and weight very little, but, they travel at very fast speed. Later, we would invent the radio and the television. In this respect we must consider books or the written press as a type of hybrid, since paper (i.e. the matter that serves as support for linguistic code capable of transmitting a message), although low in weight, cannot circulate at the speed of light. Books are too heavy, but they are much easier to transport than the human beings who wrote them. This is where their key importance in history and culture lies. In order to listen to a person, there is no need to travel to the place where this person lives.

The movement mechanisms of micro matter get to a special point when they reach two way capabilities (bi-direction). It is obvious that one can answer a letter with another letter, or a telegraphic message with another one. A conversation through the radio or the television becomes more complicated. When two human beings talk on the phone, both of them can simultaneously use the same transmitting mechanism. The funny thing is that we still think that two people speaking on the phone are in different points in space. It is, however, absolutely evident that both share the same auditory space. Otherwise, how could one be listening to the other? Auditorily speaking, with their capability of moving micro matter, both of them manage to be in the same place, they talk and listen with the same quality as they would talk and listen if they had run into each other on the street. Both of them have moved to a common auditory super-space without moving their respective bodies even one inch. Internet, the net of nets, deploys in all its might this mobility logic, electronic in terms of matter, and symbolic in terms of sense. It is true that we have yet to develop a tele-smell or a tele-touch, which is why we still cannot kiss each other from a distance, but we have already started building a fabulous audiovisual tele-space. We surf on the net, from my point of view, not just as a figure of speech but also on a literal sense. What happens is that, just as in the case of the telephone, we still give ontological priority to territorial space. This is a huge mistake. Each type of mobility generates its "own" specific space. We all live in a biological or pedestrian space, in a mechanical or vehicle space and in an electronic or audiovisual space. Each one of them has a differentiated vital ontology, and we weave our lives with the structure of movements we use to link these three spaces.

Nomadic sedentariness¹, as a mobility structure characteristic of our advanced societies, alludes firstly to the fact that, currently, we construct our vital space based on an intense and complex number

of mobilities in all their scopes, basically the three we have mentioned. It's been a long time since we stopped being sedentary. We live a nomadic life, with no specific place. In reality, there is no single place where life can be maintained. Our life is always life in movement, and this is why we are constantly moving from one place to another. We travel to millions of places, we navigate through multitude of spaces, we come and go, we leave and return. Multi-spatial mobility is immanent to any human being's existence within a developed society. In the existential context only the mobile being can survive. The plant-man, perfectly sedentary and non-mobile, is doomed to starvation and a fatal oblivion. Thus, from this point of view, the right to mobility is more than an expression of the right to freedom, it is and expression of the right that every human being has to live and survive.

But a nomadic sedentariness, as a guideline of mobility in our advanced societies, cannot compare itself to a pure nomadism, characterized by the mere and constant zombie stroll through the spaces. The set of all our movements has a certain structure, it gravitates around certain central places which are vitally very relevant and generate a strong attraction effect. Among them, the *home* is the rotation point with the highest attraction power, it is the most relevant vital anchor. This is why the majority of our movements are configured as a complex but recurrent structure, with exits and returns, coming from and going to this central place constituted by the home. The expectation of the return, the coming back to the home, that is, to a point fixed in space from which we leave and to which we hope to return, is an essential part of today's nomadism. We are nomadic planets always rotating around a sun, nomads incapable of shedding off our natural sedentariness claimed and demanded by every life. Without a sedentary reference the mobile being would lose all orientation, he would become crazy by diving into an ocean of continuous and chaotic movements without any purpose. Life demands movement, but life also demands stability and stillness. Man can only be by being and living in a place, planting roots in a certain place, stoking up the hearth of some home. Even birds look for a branch or build a nest in which to rest. This is why, together with the right to mobility, we must demand, today maybe more than ever and at least with the same certainty, the right of every human being to stillness.

As we have mentioned, there are three types of mobility, biological, mechanical and electronic, and two types of movement, translation movements and rotation movements. We undertake a translation movement when we change, more or less permanently, our vital anchor, our place of residence which is our most relevant rotation point. Migratory movements are translation movements. However, when we go to work, we go shopping, we go on a field trip or we go to see a friend, and afterwards we return home, we are undertaking a rotation movement. We start at a certain point in space and subsequently we return to this point. The difference between these two types of movement is relative, since in our mobility structure there are many rotation points. For example, the holiday place to which we travel is also a temporary rotation point. From the apartment or from the hotel we will undertake several trips to other places with the intention of returning to our temporary place of residence. Likewise, from our workplace we will also deploy a certain movement structure, of coming and going, which rotates around this point in space. This does not mean, however, that all these points have the same power of attraction. There is a clear hierarchy among them.

To summarize, our global mobility structure is made up of a series of translation movements which take us to places from which we will undertake many rotation movements. We are sedentary to the extent that we come back to certain places, and we are nomads to the extent that from the moment we arrive we know we will have to leave again. We are bird-men, but also plant-men. Nomadic sedentariness, inasmuch as a general guideline of the multiple mobilities and infinite number of movements deployed by human beings, establishes the fundamental frame from which we must think about all our mobility rights, and also, of course, all our rights to stillness. From a sociological point of view, taking into account both the individual and the social structures, two basic questions come up: Up to what point is a human being's quality of life affected by the limits and restrictions imposed by the system over his wishes of mobility? Up to what point is a human being's quality of life affected by the fact of having to move even against one's own wishes?

A system of pure mechanical mobility, in which all vital functions must be satisfied by journeys by car, motorcycle, railway, bus, subway or plane restricts the biological mobility of the pedestrian or the cyclist, and, even more importantly, ruins the possibility of living in small common territorial universes tailor-made for mankind. When cities are designed exclusively for mobility by means of a car, we limit at the same time our right to pedestrian mobility and we ruin the life of the neighbourhood as well as the relationship between neighbours which characterizes small communities. In the city of Los Angeles no-one forbids us to walk, but, in fact, no-one walks because we would get nowhere just by walking. Architectural and other types of barriers that prevent, or, in the best of cases, make it difficult for disabled people to move about, constitute a clear violation of their right to mobility. But the inexistence of close territorial surroundings in which to live also makes them deploy a significant,

and maybe even unnecessary, quantity of mechanical movements. In this way, their right to stillness is undoubtedly also violated. "In our civilization we have taken the logic of mechanical mobility to such an extent that, without even realizing, we have cut our fundamental rights to pedestrian mobility, de facto ruining the possibility of living in reduced, dense and close territorial contexts".

The territorial structure imposed by the car civilization, based on mechanical mobility, makes us specifically take into account the limits and restrictions that affect the freedom of this type of movement. In the framework of a big city, the existence of an adequate public transport system establishes a great deal of effects on costs and time spent in mobility. The place of residence and the purchasing power define to a great extent the amount of time out of their lives that people will have to invest in the set of forced mobilities imposed by their city. Public transport reduces the price of the journey, but increases its length of time and makes it difficult to control, both in spatial and in temporal terms, our urban movements. An inefficient public urban transport system establishes the difference between mobile first class citizens, those who move by car, and mobile second class citizens, those who have to use the bus. When a person is subject to the daily torture of making four journeys for work reasons in an inefficient public transport system, or when the driver suffers day after day the nightmare of traffic jams, we are violating their right to mobility. When a child wakes up early to get to school on time after a long bus journey, we are also violating the right every child has to stillness.

Almost identical arguments can be made with respect to electronic mobility, since at this point in time not everyone enjoys the same rights to mobility. Electronic mobility allows us to access far away places without interfering in our right to stillness, and therefore the impossibility of talking on the phone or communicating through the internet have to be seen as violations of both our right to mobility and our right to stillness. Electronic mobility not only allows us to move through cyberspace, it also reduces to a great extent the forced need to move with mechanical means throughout the territory. The decrease in the number of journeys to work within the last few years is a proven fact, decrease that is possible due to the possibilities of communication allowed by the new technologies. Likewise, telework allows us to choose with greater degrees of freedom our place of residence, which affects those rights linked to translation movements. Nonetheless, as in the case of mechanical mobility, an organization of our social systems exclusively oriented towards this type of mobility would ruin the types of lifestyles naturally associated with biological and mechanical mobility. The experience of contemplating a masterpiece of art in the materiality and authenticity of its canvas is not comparable to the mere virtual visit to a museum. In the same way, the richness of interaction possible through a physical encounter is not comparable to the necessarily shortened interaction of a virtual encounter.

We have the right to move through the spaces that make up the multiple mobilities in our habitat, and we have the right to enjoy the stillness which should not reduce or diminish our vital opportunities. The conflict between the right to mobility and the right to stillness is currently expressed, in its maximum radicalism and dramatism, in the case of migratory movements. Do we, inhabitants of the rich societies, have the right to prevent human beings from other countries from living in our own country? Do we have the right to limit migratory translations, originated in poor countries, when at the same time we show off, through the media and without any shame the most shameful squandering and consumer waste? Without a doubt, any human being has the right to freely establish its place of residence. Thus, when opulent societies become stronger by building higher walls in order to hinder any undesirable entry, and we are not talking about the entry of tourists, they are violating the basic right of mobility. Furthermore, these societies are also a responsible party in the violation of another fundamental right, i.e. the right to stillness. In other words, are these people really free when they decide to leave their countries, when they decide to leave their home towns, leaving family and friends behind? Is it a free will mobility or is it merely a mobility to make them free, i.e., a mobility forced by the lousy conditions present in the places from which they fly? Rich societies, ignoring the miserable fate of millions of people, also violate their right to stillness, the right of any human being, if this is his wish, to stay in his place of origin surrounded by his people.

To summarize, we live in a world in which the vital territory of people has exploded into numerous vital islands to which we arrive and from which we part with a complex and overwhelming movement structure. Biological, mechanical and electronic mobilities. Translation and rotation movements. Our life, our quality of life, depends more every day on the journeys we have to make and on the ones we are able to make. Because of this, and similar to many other aspects of our existence, certain basic rights must be observed. Within a relatively brief period in history, we have gone from living in a solid society to living in a liquid one. Now, with the introduction of new communication technologies we quickly enter into what we would qualify as gaseous societies, societies in which nothing and no-one stops, in which everything and everyone is frantically moving from one place to the other. The *solid society*, territorially delimited and very dense, was based on a biological or organic

mobility. In the *liquid society*, with the appearance of the different mechanical mobilities, this unified territory was fragmented into millions of places far away from each other. With the new communication technologies, and specially Internet, the space not only increases its degree of fragmentation but it also dilutes itself into a super-space of flows and movements in which the particles, i.e. the human beings, can instantly be in any place they wish. In the *gaseous society* no-one is anywhere, we all bump into everyone else by constantly changing places. Movement has won the battle over space, since it is the mobilities themselves the ones who determine our habitat space. And this is, precisely, what makes it so urgent and necessary for us to re-think, in these new conditions of existence, our rights to mobility. Also, I insist, our fundamental rights to stillness. We cannot continue to think that an indefinite increase of mobility can continue to guarantee, in the future, an indefinite increase in our welfare. Quite the contrary, we must decide among us what specific mobility and stillness structure could constitute the foundation for a future improvement of our welfare.

The necessary conciliation between the rights to mobility and the rights to stillness can be expressed with a very simple formula. We must commit ourselves to building a new world, with a new spatial structure, *one in which human beings have to move less often*, and *in which human beings may move more freely*. The current historical conditions demand a new equilibrium between the right to stillness, which tends to prevent undesired and forced movements, and the right to mobility, which tends to guarantee desired and free movements. We have the right to have to move less often, and we have the right to be able to move freely. Only by playing with this apparent contradiction we may, in the future, arrive to a real *place*.

¹ Bericat Alastuey, Eduardo (1994), *Sociología de la movilidad espacial. El sedentarismo nómada*, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Monografías nº 140, Madrid.