

# PREFACE: STUCK IN MOTION? CAPTURING THE DIALECTICS OF MOVEMENT AND STASIS IN AN ERA OF CONTAINMENT

## ABSTRACT

In this special section we think through the role of movement and stasis in an age of globalisation from an existential perspective. We suggest that this epistemological avenue is particularly well suited to moving beyond the dualistic binaries that have haunted much writing on mobilities. Rather than fixing movement and stasis at two opposite poles, this perspective allows us to work productively with the overlaps and paradoxes as they appear in the everyday, thereby carving out a *dialectics* of im/mobility. We argue that exploring the interplay of movement and stasis has become particularly important in the current global political climate, where the mobilities of people and groups deemed troublesome are violently cut short or obstructed in ways that keep them 'stuck' in continuous loops of motion. By zooming in on the vectorial metaphors that migrants and refugees seemingly stuck in immovable conditions deploy to make sense of their situations, we conceptualise both the existential orientation of migratory projects and the wider social and political coordinates impinging on these inner quests for (forward) movement and/or stillness.<sup>1</sup>

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In this special issue we—a group of anthropologists conducting research in different parts of the world with a joint interest in radical empirical ethnographic theorisation—have collaborated to think through new epistemological avenues that allow us to capture the idiosyncratic interrelationship between movement and stasis. We believe that paying analytical attention to this interplay is of crucial importance at a moment that is characterised by unprecedented levels of migration as well

as unparalleled practices of containment. Influenced by existentially oriented writings, we start from the premise that movement and stasis refer to more than the physical processes involved in staying put, taking people from location A to B, or how bodies are directed in space and time. Rather, we treat movement and stasis as profound *existential* orientations that enable us to explore the ways humans are situated in the world and the actions they take in relation to it. Movement and stasis thus point

to both how people move or settle and to the ways they *are* moved or settled (Salazar, Elliot and Norum 2017: 2).

With the much-proclaimed ‘mobility turn’ (Faist 2013) taking hold of the social sciences since the mid 2000s, the role of movement and stasis has gained considerable scholarly attention (e.g. Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Elliot, Norum and Salazar 2017; Salazar 2017). Yet, while there has been a surge of interest in mobile phenomena in recent years, it is questionable whether we can actually speak of a distinct mobility paradigm, particularly in the light of several decades of intense anthropological engagement with migration, movement, and displacement pre-dating this ‘turn’. In the 1990s, conceptual debates about the role of movement and stasis in a globally interconnected world played a crucial role in the reformulation of anthropology as a more open, self-reflexive, and politically conscious discipline. There was a counter-movement against the tendency in classic anthropological theorisations of culture to normalise sedentarism and stability. Following on from Appadurai’s (1988: 37) suggestion that much ethnographic writing tends to ‘incarcerate natives’ in places, anthropologists began to look for alternative analytical lenses that would not, by default, root people in places (Clifford 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992). They called for a change in focus from stable, rooted, and mappable identities to fluid, transitory, and migratory phenomena. The result of this development was the acceptance of *movement* as a new lens through which anthropologists would come to look at the world (Lems 2016).

In recent years there has been an increased critique of the celebratory view on movement and deterritorialisation that emerged as a response to the sedentarist paradigm in anthropology (Easthope 2009; Kalir 2012;

Salazar and Smart 2012; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; Lems 2018) and the social sciences at large (Faist 2013; Sheller 2017). Much of this emphasis on mobility has allowed for the uncritical reproduction of idealised ideas of productivity, speed, and progress, which, in turn, need to be read within a very particular Western modernist tradition of thought. Scholars have therefore started to take aim at the way many contemporary social science texts describe it as ‘somehow “better”, culturally, economically, or politically, to be mobile than immobile’ (Bissell 2007: 279). In line with this critique, anthropologists increasingly direct attention to the manner in which ‘regimes of mobility’ (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) structure and channel individuals’ and groups’ movements (de Genova and Peutz 2010; Andersson 2014), and to the flipside of modernity, which is characterised by boredom, stuntedness, and stasis rather than excitement and speed (Hage 2009; Elliot 2015; Gaibazzi 2015; O’Neill 2017). What emerges from these recent engagements is an explicit interest in the *interrelationship* between mobility and immobility (e.g. Gutekunst et al. 2016; Palmberger and Tošić 2017; Schapendonk 2017). In an attempt to move beyond the idealisation of nomadic, borderless ways of being, anthropologists have started to pay explicit ethnographic attention to the social, political, and economic processes that allow some people to move about freely and force others to stay put. They argue that the complexities of social life require an analytical point of view that fosters a deeper understanding of the intertwined experiences of movement and stasis. This special section is in conversation with these recent efforts to develop epistemological frameworks that allow us to look at movement and stasis through the double prism of *im/mobilities* (Salazar and Smart 2012). Our explicit aim is to capture the

*dialectical* ways movement and stasis permeate people's everyday lives and to pose the question of how far this attention to the details of individuals' experiences enables us to make wider observations about the social and political currency of the lived dialectics of im/mobility. We depart from the loosely defined coordinates of existential anthropology to test out the extent to which this particular epistemological avenue might help unpick binary oppositions that have haunted much writing on im/mobilities.

We take our cue from anthropologists who have emphasised that states of movement and dwelling are not just physical processes, but inextricably linked to people's ways of being-in-the-world (Hage 2005, 2009; Vigh 2009; Lucht 2011; Jackson 2013a). While not all of these writers would self-identify as existential anthropologists, they have demonstrated the substantial and multifaceted insights that can be gained from looking at the crucial *existential* questions that conditions of movement or stasis throw up in people's everyday engagements with the world. As Michael Jackson (2013a: 6) points out, such an existential approach to im/mobility starts from the question of the wherewithal of life itself, before considering the particular ways it is understood or the conditions under which it can be accessed and shared. This does not mean that ethnographic observation can be reduced to individualistic, metaphysical descriptions of human experiences of movement or stasis. As Jackson demonstrates in his work, an existential focus always entails an exploration of the relationship between the particular and the universal. Of crucial importance for our special section, it entails an understanding of being itself as plural, as a form of inter-existence that is constantly transforming and on the move.

Our capacity for becoming other in relation to other selves also explains the

persistence with which human beings have from time immemorial moved, migrated, and mutated, adjusting to radically new circumstances, despite the risks involved, the losses incurred, and the suffering undergone. (Jackson 2013a: 204)

Hans Lucht's (2011) ethnography of young male migrants from Ghana demonstrates that a foregrounding of existential questions can produce a deeper understanding of how states of movement and stasis condition each other. He traces the lifeworlds of a group of young fishermen who have left their home villages in Ghana in search of a life worth living, just to find themselves yet again struggling for survival at the margins of Italian society. In staying close to the young men's lived experiences, he captures the ambiguous and often deeply contradictory ways in which mobility and immobility condition and play into each other. He coins the notion of 'existential reciprocity' to depict the fishermen's struggles to gain a sense of purchase over their lives—'to reposition themselves within the circulation of symbolic and material goods, within a global context that seems to hinder them on all fronts' (Lucht 2011: xii). In conversation with existential theorisation, Lucht is able to pay tribute to both migrants' urge for action and forward movement, and the concessions they have to make in this process, leading to extended periods of uncertainty, waiting and stagnation (*ibid.*: 16).

The contributors to this special section have also taken inspiration from Ghassan Hage's (2005, 2009) attempts to think through the ways people experience and imagine life itself in terms of a sense of movement or stasis. Hage (2009: 98) notes that it is important to take the link between well-being and a sense of mobility seriously. This link is even embedded in such everyday statements as 'How are you

going<sup>3</sup>, a greeting that can be found in many different languages across the world. Rather than discarding such sayings as metaphorical, Hage argues that they convey a sense that when a person feels well, they actually feel like they are moving well in life. This is particularly important in understanding the dialectics of movement and stasis in migrants' lived experiences. Migrants are not usually motivated to leave their home places by an irresistible human urge to move about or cross borders. Migrants often engage in physical mobility to satisfy their need for an existential sense of forward movement (Hage 2005: 470). It is only when people feel that their home environments do not allow them to go anywhere that they start considering physical mobility.

We do not engage in existential mobility in order to experience physical mobility. The contrary is true: we engage in the kind of physical mobility that defines us as migrants because we feel another geographical space is a better launching pad for our existential selves. (Hage 2005: 470)

Hage (2009: 99) notes that just as there is an imaginary existential mobility, there is also an existential sense of immobility, or 'stuckness'. This stuckness does not necessarily equate to a lack of social mobility. As Hage aptly explains, people can be in a good job, climbing the social ladder and still feel stuck. Social and existential immobility are therefore not the same thing. The sense of existential immobility is defined by a lack of agency—physically or existentially:

stuckness is by definition a situation where a person suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to

grab such alternatives even if they present themselves. (Hage 2009: 100)

Again, this sense of existential stuckness should not be thought of as an absolute or immovable condition. Interestingly, the idea of enduring a situation, of sticking it out, actually returns a certain sense of movement, by

asserting some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim and an object in circumstances that are conspiring to make a total agentless victim and object out of you. (Hage 2009: 101)

It is precisely these paradoxical dynamics that the contributors to this special section try to capture. Rather than fixing movement and stasis at two opposite poles, we work productively with the overlaps, alternations, and paradoxes as they appear in the everyday experiences of the people we worked with, thereby carving out a dialectics of im/mobility. Guided by existential epistemology, we test out what happens when we do not approach movement and stasis solely as socio-political constructs or physical conditions, but as 'existential orientations' (Ratcliffe 2008; Slaby 2010)—as foundational ingredients to experience that accentuate 'the entirety of a person's situated existence and thereby also the textures of the situations in which the person finds herself' (Slaby 2010: 103). In the context of his work on the role of human emotions, philosopher Jan Slaby defines existential orientations as 'the basic structures of our *ways of being*, the ways in which we *are*' (ibid. 104, emphasis in the original). In a similar vein, we approach movement and stasis as phenomena that orient our ways of experiencing, relating to, and making sense of the world. In attuning our view to the fundamental questions thrown

up amidst the ebb and flow of everyday life, movement and stasis enable us think through the links between how we orient ourselves in the world and how this world in turn orients us.

## VECTORIAL METAPHORS

While keeping our focus on the existential predicaments that the everyday intertwinement of movement and stasis help us unravel, we do not locate these movements and halts within neutral, non-specified space. Anthropologists of migration and displacement have sufficiently demonstrated that they are inextricably linked to social, political, historical, and economic factors that channel, boost, or decelerate them (e.g. Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Ramsay 2017; Andersson 2019). Existential and phenomenological approaches have repeatedly—and to a certain extent unfairly—been accused of creating apolitical, ahistorical, and intuitive depictions of social life (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1973). The authors in this special issue are therefore unified in their aim of bringing a decidedly political dimension into existential anthropology. As the politicisation and (often violent) obstruction of migratory moves show, we cannot even begin to understand the existential force of movement and stasis without emplacing them within the wider field of forces acting upon them. It is precisely because of this ambiguous interplay of politics and experience that anthropologists and philosophers alike have struggled to find epistemological frameworks capable of capturing the ubiquity of movement and stasis without giving preference to one over the other. This special section therefore attempts to test out and develop radical ethnographic analytical tools that allow us to grasp the dialectics of movement and stasis. Rather than focusing solely on bodies in action *or* stagnancy, or on the forces propelling people *or* slowing

them down, we suggest that we need to come to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between all these different processes in relation to each other.

Inspired by the existential-phenomenological dictum to return ‘to the things themselves’ (Husserl 1970 [1913]), we develop our theoretical concepts from the mundane, everyday manner in which movement and stasis appear in the lifeworlds of concrete individuals and social groups whose lives are marked by particular patterns and rhythms of im/mobility and socio-legal status. When collaborating on this issue, the authors found that the people they worked with often deployed vectorial metaphors to make sense of how they experienced or imagined life as a flow or standstill. The articles therefore pay particular attention to the appearance of such metaphors in everyday life, using them as a point of departure for capturing the dialectics of movement and stasis. That we chose to describe these metaphors as ‘vectorial’ has to do with the multidimensionality they convey. In mathematical language, a vector is defined as a quantity (such as velocity or force) possessing both a magnitude and a direction (Clapham and Nicholson 2009). Mathematicians are concerned with the transformation of such vectors in accordance with changes in the coordinate system. Taking our cue from the multidimensionality this scientific reading of vectors allows us to capture, we translate it into an anthropological context to conceptualise both the existential orientation of migratory projects and the wider social and political coordinates impinging on these quests for (forward) movement and/or stillness. By staying close to the ways these metaphors appear in daily interactions, narrations and experiences of migrants and refugees, we use them as a means of shedding light on how people negotiate their movements and halts in place and time in

accordance with the various forces, ideas, and obstacles criss-crossing or channelling their paths.

In previous work we have found the idea of the trajectory to be a fruitful means for understanding webs of histories, politics, and biography woven into migrants' movements and halts (Tošić and Lems 2019; also see Schapendonk and Steel 2014). The group of authors in this special section are part of a larger collaborative endeavour that aims to rethink the entanglements of mobility and immobility from an existential perspective. While one part of this collective used the notion of the trajectory to trace genealogies of im/mobility patterns between Africa and Europe (Bachelet 2019; Gaibazzi 2019; Lucht 2019; Perl 2019; Souiah 2019), the authors of this special section trace the ways life itself is experienced as im/mobile. In doing so we can draw on Henrik Vigh's (2009) work, and particularly his notion of 'social navigation'. He coined the term to convey how people move in social environments 'of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along' (Vigh 2009: 420). The concept of social navigation introduces a multidimensional perspective on mobility. It allows us to capture both the ways people move within social environments and the ways these social environments move them. While social scientists often focus either on the question of how social formations change over time, or how people move within these social formations, the concept of social navigation tries to show the intersection (or, as Vigh puts it, 'interactivity') between these domains of social life.

Social navigation, in this manner, adds an extra dimension to practice as we become able to focus on the way people's movement in their social environments is constantly

attuned and adjusted to the unfolding of the environment itself and the effect this has on possible positions and trajectories. (ibid.: 425)

The vectorial metaphors the authors of this special section look at mirror the multidimensional sense of im/mobility suggested by Vigh. They allow us to closely observe individuals' trajectories and detail the forces propelling or halting them. On yet another level this vectorial angle allows us to move beyond individuals' physical or imaginary trajectories and pay special attention to the directionality and magnitude of life as it unfolds.

## STUCK IN MOTION

The existential force of movement and stasis is essentially a human condition that cannot be reduced to the figure of the migrant or refugee alone. Yet given the acceleration of an uneven politics of mobility in recent years, we decided not to focus on the experiences of individuals who possess the financial and social capital to roam the world freely, but on people whose movements and halts are subject to intense control. We believe that understanding the interplay of the forces that channel people's migratory pathways, as well as the experiences, stories, and ideas that guide the actions of those who try to identify a way forward or a place to stay put, is of particular importance in the current global political climate, where the figure of the migrant is once again subject to intense exclusionary practices. In recent years we have witnessed a dramatic intensification of the politicisation and containment of migrant mobilities across the globe (Andersson 2019; Gaibazzi, Bellagamba and Dünwald 2017). The unprecedented number of people on the move recorded in the summer months of 2015 were

almost immediately met with counter-moves by policymakers to manage, disrupt, and contain these migratory flows. In a climate of highly selective and violent closed-door policies, talk of an insurmountable 'migration crisis' has led to different mobile figures being played off against each other. Within these dynamics, the figure of the 'bogus', 'economic' migrant has come to be held against the 'genuine', 'traumatised' refugee, and the figure of the 'regular', 'integrated' migrant against the 'irregular' migrant or 'queue jumper', thereby erasing the complex and overlapping political, economic, and social realities that propel people to leave their homes or stay put (Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Ramsay 2019). These hierarchies of deservingness and undeservingness have created clear-cut moral delineations between the legitimacy of the mobility of some and the illegitimacy of that of others. This logic did not appear out of the blue or as the consequence of a 'crisis', but instead has been in the making at least since the 1990s, when wealthy nation states started to fence themselves off against unwanted migrants and refugees from countries struck by poverty and postcolonial conflicts (Chimni 1998).

The disciplining and management of the mobilities of people and groups deemed troublesome or 'unruly' (Tazzioli 2018) has produced highly ambiguous new social realities for migrants and refugees who find their movements cut short, while simultaneously being kept in a continuous loop of motion. In the context of EU asylum policies, Martina Tazzioli (2018) recently identified a shift in the management of migratory mobilities. She argues that techniques of control that became visible in the context of the 'migration crisis' no longer attempt to detain and control unwanted migrants, but rather channel and partition their

movements, thereby creating a strategy of what she describes as 'containment through mobility':

By containment through mobility, I refer to the fact that migration movements are obstructed in their autonomy not only by generating immobility and conditions of strandedness, nor through constant surveillance but through administrative, political and legal measures that use (forced) mobility as a technique of government. (Tazzioli 2018: 2765)

In this context, containment should not be misinterpreted as a form of confinement. Rather, the disciplining of migrant mobilities is now enacted by forcing migrants into erratic counter-moves, whereby they are kept on the move in ways that never allow them to arrive anywhere. The articles in this special section demonstrate that these politics of containment cannot be restricted to the European Union alone. Through in-depth ethnographic case studies we show that the paradigm of keeping mobile people *stuck in motion* is equally at play in Russia, where irregular labour migrants from Central Asia are kept at bay by forcing them into never-ending states of waithood and queuing up for documents to regularise a status that never materialises (Reeves, this issue), in the exploitative migrant labour regime of the Gulf, where Egyptian men's dreams of quick wealth, travel and excitement give way to hard work, extended waiting to save money, and repeated cycles of leaving and returning (Schielke, this issue), as well as in Switzerland, where young refugees find themselves confronted with strong public expectations about 'integration' and upward social mobility through education while being held back by this very integration regime (Lems, this issue).

By shedding light on the dialectical manifestations of movement and stasis in the everyday lives of highly mobile individuals and groups in these three countries, the articles in this special section examine how far a return to experience as a crucial anthropological dimension of inquiry can lead to new insights into the interplay of movement and stasis. By paying critical attention to the details of lived experiences, the articles highlight the deeply existential quandaries and tribulations that varying and intersecting experiences of being-on-the-move and being-on-hold bring into the open: Is there an interrelationship between a sense of moving forward in one's life and the hope for stability? How do people who are seemingly stuck in immovable situations negotiate their positions and overcome the feeling of stagnation? How, in turn, do experiences of movement relate to borders and limitations? Viewing these questions through an existential lens, we sketch the contours of a dialectics of migrant im/mobility that pays attention to the ambiguous and at times paradoxical ways mobile and decelerating states appear in people's everyday engagements with the world.

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

In speaking of a 'dialectics' of movement and stasis we are inspired by thinkers who have elevated contradiction to one of the core principles of social theorisation. While one could argue that existential theories do not necessarily sit well with a Marxist or Hegelian emphasis on dialectics, the underlying principle of the dialectical method helps us to capture the often eclectic ways migrants and refugees make sense of movement and stasis in their everyday lives. Rather than attempting to understand

movement or stasis as isolated phenomena, we take our cue from the dialectical tradition to think through the seemingly disparate ends that together make up the world, thereby creating a 'unity of opposites' (Morris 2014: 9). The most important epistemological motive that we take from the idea of dialectics in its widest sense is that movement and stasis are dynamic and mutually constitutive, as human experiences of their interplay bring about new ways of conceiving of one's life and navigating the socio-political conditions one is confronted with. That this epistemology of contradictions does not necessarily run counter to existential streams of thought can be seen in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1975), whose attempt to bring existentialism and Marxism into conversation with each other greatly influenced Michael Jackson's outline of an existential anthropology (Jackson 2005). Jackson has continuously argued for an anthropological engagement with theory based on an intersubjective model of understanding that takes into account the complex interplay of the particular and the universal (Jackson 1998). Such a model, he stresses, necessitates a dialectical approach:

For while the ethnographer is both influenced by his or her initial preoccupations and by the other's self-understandings, the outcome of any intersubjective encounter is never a synthesis of all the various points of view taken together, but an arbitrary closure that leaves both self and other with a provisional and open-ended view that demands further dialogue and engagement. (Jackson 2009: 242)

Jackson's emphasis on dialectics does not just relate to anthropology's work of knowledge production. It is based on the existentialist conviction that dialectics needs to be regarded



as a crucial principle of the human condition, which encompasses existence as such. The dynamic and transforming unity of opposites is therefore not just a conceptual tool, but it infiltrates people's entire sense of being-in-the-world as well as the existential orientations directing them. As pointed out above with regards to our take on dialectics in this issue, we conceive of movement and stasis as important examples for such existential orientations, allowing us to shed light on the ways movement and stasis envelop and condition each other in open-ended, arbitrary, and perhaps even contradictory ways.

The authors in this special issue have been strongly influenced by Jackson's work, and particularly by his insistence that theories should be regarded as part and parcel of the world they appear in, rather than as transcendent views (Jackson 1996: 1). This emphasis on lived experience also means that theories are never complete or 'finished'. In a similar vein, the articles take individuals' lived through, narrated, and reflected on experience(s) of the intertwinement of movement and stasis and the resulting new ways of being under changing socio-political parameters as epistemological points of departure. In doing so, they shed light on the explicit (and often violent) manner in which policies of exclusion and containment seep into migrants' daily lives and the strategies they deploy in response to the forces holding them back or pushing them on the way. This ethnographic focus on experience highlights the dialectics of im/mobility in various ways. On the one hand it is on the biographical temporal scale that life is experienced (and remembered) as the interplay of moving (forward, backward, up, down...) and standing still. On the other, the ethnographic focus on experience shows that in some situations individuals and collectives can perceive physical mobility as a form of

confinement and being trapped, whereas dwelling in a place can be felt as dynamic, full of movement, and an ultimate state of freedom.

The notion of experience represents one of the core epistemological pillars of ethnography, but the relationship between its vernacular and theoretical uses is difficult to disentangle (Willen and Seeman 2012: 1). With very few exceptions (e.g. Turner 1985; Desjarlais 1996; Mattingly 1998; Throop 2010; Das 2018) anthropologists have worked with blurry, everyday taken-for-granted understandings of experience, thereby failing to properly think through a key entry point into ethnographic theorisation. As the recent debates around 'everyday religion' (Schielke 2009; 2015; Fadil and Fernando 2015) and 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek 2010; Robbins 2016; Das 2016) show, the question of how to conceptualise important anthropological notions, such as 'experience', 'everydayness', or 'ordinariness', is a highly debated topic in contemporary anthropology. Moreover, experience is frequently associated with passivity (in terms of passively living through something) and thus 'being apolitical', and often figures in opposition to a fuzzy and implicit notion of agency in terms of 'active' resistance (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 378). As Veena Das (2007: 6–7) poignantly puts it, 'relationships require a repeated attention to the most ordinary of objects and events, but our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than a descent into it' (Das 2007: 6–7). The authors of this special section share Das' conviction that a descent into the ordinary can deliver crucial new insights and allow anthropologists to complicate grand theoretical claims and ideas. Translated to this special issue's epistemological project of dissolving the conceptual binary between movement and stasis through direct engagements with people's everyday experiences

this means that we can only do so on the basis of a specific reading of experience. This reading needs to take into account the continuous interplay of structure and agency that marks people's engagements with the world.

While resisting a unitary paradigm, existentially oriented anthropologists are unified through an interest in the question of how people deal with the tension between choice and circumstance. By generating theorisations from the lived experiences of particular human beings, they aim to move away from anthropology's long-standing fascination with monolithic concepts, such as 'the' social or 'the' cultural, and towards the particularity of intersubjective, everyday processes of meaning-making. In the existential intellectual tradition experience is not solely conceptualised as a passive, non-reflective, bodily act of living through something. While taking into account the structuring of human experience by different intersecting power-knowledge regimes, existential thinkers approach experience in terms of the ways people navigate the human condition of being both an actor and acted upon, or a 'who' and a 'what' (Jackson 1998: 8). Existentially oriented anthropologists therefore often emphasise the microcosm over the macrocosm. This does not mean that they deny the powers, processes, or presences that often govern our lives. Instead, they

wish to restore to the anthropological worldview a sense of the small and tangible things that make life viable and negotiable despite the forces that elude our comprehension and control. (Jackson and Piette 2015: 5)

It is precisely this existential approach to experience that we adopt in our readings of migrant im/mobilities. It allows us to develop

an experiential focus that continually moves between the immediate, pre-reflective, and affective ways people live through situations they find themselves thrown into and the temporally extended means they use to encounter the world through reflection, experimentation, and learning (Lems 2018: 49).

Our existential focus on how im/mobility is experienced and navigated is not only a contribution to anthropology's critical assessment of the present transformations of a biopolitics of movement, inequality, and exclusion on a global scale. It also represents an epistemological means to reconceptualise the political beyond 'explicit' resistance and the victim/hero binary. As mentioned above, the theme of mobility and the figure of the migrant are currently heavily politicised in a simplified and distorted yet highly efficient way, as indicated by the steady rise of exclusionary and populist ideologies. In these dominant discursive formations, the figure of the migrant appears as either the victim or the threat, as either the passive individual in need of humanitarian aid or the welfare scrounger or potential terrorist. Beyond this hegemonic imagery of the migrant as either completely apolitical or violently political, what often escapes social science accounts of contemporary migration is precisely how (the majority of) people on the move actually live with(in) migration regimes that keep them trapped or in the loop of repeated moves towards what is perceived to be a better life.

While all of the contributors to this special issue take inspiration from these existential themes, they do not claim to be part of an existential *turn* or to advance particular existentialist schools of thought. Readers expecting this special section to present an instruction manual for a clear-cut existential epistemology of movement and stasis will

therefore be disappointed: None of the authors are inclined to form or be part of a new paradigm. In a university landscape that is increasingly marked by neoliberal demands, this refusal to be pinned down or part of some trendy 'shift' can easily be interpreted as a sign of weakness. However, it is precisely the non-compliance with this logic of nicely boxed ideas ready to be capitalised on in the academic market that attracted us to existentialist themes. The refusal to pin down and define what existential theory is (or is not) can be seen as a foundational element of this intellectual tradition. Walter Kaufmann (1956: 11) has argued that we should not understand existentialism as a philosophy, but as 'a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy'. Many of the thinkers and writers who have been described as representatives of existentialism, such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, or Karl Jaspers, actually repudiated this label. This rejection went so far that Kaufmann ironically suggests that 'a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion for each other'. Yet, he goes on to point out that this 'refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life' needs to be seen as one of the core principles that is at the heart of existentialist thought (ibid.: 12).

## THE ARTICLES

The micropolitics of everyday—often silent and embodied—experiences, struggles, and pathways through different contemporary regimes of im/mobility inform the ethnographic accounts in this special section. The epistemological

focus is developed through experiences and metaphors of im/mobility as they have emerged in the course of the dialogical and intersubjective practice of ethnography. In order to realise the existential epistemological framework, the articles in this special issue have to move beyond familiar formats for anthropological theory texts. By experimenting with dialogical forms of ethnographic writing the authors raise questions about the specifics of an existentially oriented anthropological approach to ethnographic theory. The dialogue can be understood as a strategy/dimension of ethnographic writing that moves beyond the often dominant drive towards (a posteriori) conceptualisation and coherence, by focusing on the very fragmentariness of knowledge as grounded in ethnographic encounters. This is of particular importance in the context of working with refugees' and migrants' stories which are interspersed with experiences of violence, loss and marginalisation. Rather than attempting to patch together interrupted narratives into something whole, an existential lens allows us to develop a dialectical epistemology that validates the fragmentary and at times disparate ways movement and stasis appear in everyday interactions, reflections, or events.

In her engagement with Central Asian irregular migrant workers' experiences of living in a legal limbo in Moscow, Madeleine Reeves explores the act of queuing as a core temporal metaphor for the ambiguity of the action and inaction that are simultaneously at play in waiting. By paying attention to the experiences of migrants endlessly queuing up for documents in order to regularise their status, she teases out 'moments of political sensing' (Reeves 1, this issue)—moments when people come to bodily feel the legally and bureaucratically enforced conditions of stasis. These moments often appear in the form of stories through which people

reflect on the violent forms of containment they are subject to. In a dialectical sense, rather than being in mere opposition to movement, the queue thus becomes a space-time of novel and changing experiences and acts of mobility. A focus on the social processes involved in migrant queues in Moscow allows Reeves to show the ambiguous temporal layers simultaneously at play in waiting. When conceptualised from the perspective of lived experiences of migrant workers navigating bureaucratic queues, stasis appears to be at once filled with exhaustion and boredom and activity and urgency. By deploying a dialogical form of ethnographic writing that pays attention to these contradictions, Reeves attempts to develop the analytical means of capturing the dialectical tension between ‘statis-in-motion’ and ‘motion-in-statis’ as it appears in migrants’ everyday lives (Reeves, this issue). In doing so, her article shows that when deployed in a critical way, an existential lens does justice to both the larger political, economic, and historical forces impacting on migrants’ lived experiences and the often tangible, very localised strategies they deploy to outwit and contest these circumstances.

While in Reeves’ contribution the queue appears as a space of movement and intense social activity, in Samuli Schielke’s article migratory movements are conceptualised as partially constituted by limitations and stasis. He takes Ghassan Hage’s (2009) idea of ‘existential mobility’—defined as a sense of moving forward in one’s life—as a point of departure to think through how movement and stasis constitute each other. By focusing on the lifeworlds of Egyptian male labour migrants in the Gulf, he traces the vectorial metaphors of ‘escape, steps, stability, return, postponement, loop, and walls’ they deploy to speak of life as a journey interspersed with borders, halts, and

recurring movements (Schielke, this issue). Ideas of inescapable walls confining them, hopes of escaping life’s daily grind, dreams of staying put, or anxieties of endlessly running around in circles did not contradict each other. They revealed the ways these Egyptian men perceived their existential mobility as related to borders and limitations. Schielke’s engagement with the vectorial metaphors he encountered suggests that life’s flow needs to be thought of as inextricably linked to its halts and interruptions—that humans always live a ‘life within limits’ (Jackson 2011). Schielke’s contribution again demonstrates that movement cannot be theorised without stasis and vice versa. By paying attention to ordinary conversations in which his Egyptian interlocutors reflected upon their situations, he is able to show that obstacles to movement are often dialectically experienced and (re)interpreted as ‘active’ limits one deals with—in interaction with others—while one develops a sense of purpose and direction. At the same time, the loops of migration Egyptian men enter motivate them to strive for an uneventful, static life of successful stability in their home villages—as a desirable condition they actively work towards, and remarkably not unlike the ‘stuckedness’ they had initially attempted to escape by embarking on migratory journeys.

In her contribution, Annika Lems explores the interplay of movement and stasis through the metaphors of moving forward, upward, and downward that young Eritrean refugees in a Swiss educational institution use to make sense of the institutional forces pulling them back. Like Schielke, she takes inspiration from Hage’s notion of existential mobility. On the one hand, she shows how the vectorial metaphor of ‘movement-through-education’ enables young refugees to overcome life-threatening obstacles on their journeys towards a better life. On the

other hand, she explores what happens when they are faced with hurdles imposed by a rigid and non-responsive integration regime in order to decelerate them, keeping them trapped in an educational setting that stops them short in their ambitions for forward movement. Thinking about suicide or uncontrollable compulsion to move and restlessness appear as core means of bringing motion into situations that are characterised by the absence of an inner sense of forward movement. By placing classic existential themes, such as anguish, death, or boredom, in a critical anthropological context, Lems' article demonstrates the need for a theoretical take on movement and stasis that manages to capture the subjective ways people experience them, while at the same time linking them to a wider 'field of forces' that has a bearing on these experiences.

Although the three articles in this special section focus on parts of the world that are marked by very different regimes of im/mobility, they each bring to the fore human experiences of movement and stasis in all their ambiguities and contradictions. While approaching movement and stasis as existential orientations that significantly guide people's ways of being-in and positioning themselves towards the world, they show how these vectors of movement and rest are channelled by a wider coordinate system. Although the authors deploy an existential lens to explore these questions, they refrain from rigidly defining (or defending) the boundaries of an existential anthropological project. They each take their own points of departure to show how an existential approach to im/mobility can reveal the inherent interrelationship between the micro and macro dimension, structure and agency, the individual and relational, and the synchronic and diachronic. Schielke deploys a narrative-biographical lens to zoom in on

the ways Egyptian migrants make sense of the limitations that channel their movements over an extended period of time; Lems uses a distinct critical event as an entry point into how young Eritreans actively deal with and contest their situation of enforced stasis; and Reeves approaches the social practice of migrants' active waiting through different means, such as everyday conversations, the circulation of popular songs, and active (bodily) participation in migrant queues. The articles approach the profound questions about human existence raised by the interplay of movement and stasis from various angles and show that an existential move of 'zooming in' on human experience can provide a fruitful epistemological avenue for capturing the complexity, depth, and contradictoriness that characterise present-day experiences of im/mobility in a world of diversifying and deepening inequality.

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