Authors Meet Critics


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Authors: Freek Colombijn, Rivke Jaffe, and Christien Klaufus


Participants
Barnum, Anthony Justin
Bird, Lawrence
Caselli, Davide
Coppola, Alessandro
Kadi, Justin
Lonergan, Gwyneth
Marzorati, Roberta
Millington, Nate

Rousseau, Max
Santos, Rui
Skodra, Julita
Tanulku, Basak
Theodosis, Lefteris
Thompson, James
Vianello, Michele
Wachsmuth, David

Moderators
Torrasi, Giovanni
Kazepov, Yuri
Welcome to everybody. Today we are going to discuss “Mobilities and Mobilizations of the Urban Poor” with Rivke Jaffe (University of Amsterdam, NL), Christien Klaufus (Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA), NL) and Freek Colombijn (VU University Amsterdam, NL).

Ok, let's start. I just wanted to thank everybody for being with us for the 8 events and hope you enjoyed them. We are working on the transcripts and most of them are in the pipeline and will be available soon on the www.ijurr.org website.

I would also like to thank today’s authors for being with us today and will leave the floor to Giovanni for moderating and to you for your questions.

Very good, thanks also to Yuri for organising this. It has been a very stimulating series of events. We already have a question by Gwyneth Lonergan, which I will post immediately.

I really enjoyed this article, and I'm really excited to read the rest of the journal issue, because my research is on the influence of the local in migrant women's activism, so these ideas have a lot of applicability. I have a question about the internalisation of hegemonic ideas around mobility, and what that can mean for the urban poor. Many of my research participants are asylum-seeking women, and some of them take great care to represent their travel from their country of origin to the UK as 'necessary' in contrast to 'economic migrants' - essentially, the same discourse used by the government, and one that justifies the appalling treatment of asylum-seekers in the UK. Did any of you come across something similar in your research?

Dear Gwyneth, thank you for your interesting question. Our answer would be that in the countries where we live, the difference is perhaps more relevant than in the country where my research takes place – Ecuador. In Ecuador, relatives of economic migrants think that their relative 'had' to leave too, because they saw no future in their own country. The government at that time regarded it as 'normal' that people would leave to get ahead in life, so in that sense they internalized that hegemonic idea of urgency.

Gwyneth, would you like to reply to that?

Yes please... I am specifically referring to ideas that may be oppressive or counter-productive to the struggles of the people in question. The women in my example are basically accepting the government's terms.

Hi Gwyneth - just to add that in Jamaica, where I do most of my research, I would say that on the one hand, "ghetto" residents in Kingston tend to verbalize a resentment and rejection of the idea that they should stay in "their place". On the other hand, in many of their everyday mobilities, they do conform to hegemonic ideas of where and how they can and should move. So in that sense, yes, people do to some extent internalize and reproduce ideas of which mobilities are "proper".

Thanks a lot! Rui Santos:

Thank you for your wonderful article! I'd like to ask you whether it would be reasonable, considering the growing importance of international organisations such as SDI or events such the World Social Forum – and the mobility they entail – to start thinking about a meta-geography of urban poverty?

Dear Rui, thank you for your stimulating question. It is interesting that we come from different backgrounds and refer to different contexts. We're not sure what you mean by meta-geography. What we have seen (and describe in our introduction) is the emergence of global networks of urban poor and/or their organizations. These are virtual networks and sometimes face-to-face contacts. If that is what you mean by meta-geography, we fully agree. In the end, however, we are most interested in behaviour of real people and not so much in abstract geographies.

Yes, that was exactly my point.
<Torrisi, Giovanni> Rui Santos, any further comment?

<Santos, Rui> Well, I just wanted to stress the fact that ICTs and events on poverty will maybe increase mobility within the urban poor; mobility in the several dimensions mentioned by the authors, and that might eventually lead to the building of a meta-geography somehow mirroring the meta-geography of global cities/players...

<Colombijn, Freek> Absolutely, that's Appadurai's idea of globalization from below.

<Santos, Rui> Thanks for your reply!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Perfect. Here it is the first of two long questions by Michele Vianello.

<Vianello, Michele> Dear authors, thank you for sharing your work and time with us. I have some curiosities about your work from my perspective, that of an urbanist. I see that one of the works (Maeckelbergh 2012) quotes Lefebvre's right to the city (p. 647), and I have the impression that it is more or less recurring theme all across the text. I have the feeling that that work is quoted in light of the later interpretation attached to it (especially after it was used as slogan by the UN Habitat Programme), while some fundamental and original issues raised by Lefebvre's are quite disregarded. For instance the stress he puts on re-organisation of social knowledge around urbanism as an oriented collective project. Do you share this idea? Or you believe in the Right to the City as a metaphor and an object of investigation?

<Klaufus, Christien> Dear Michele, we have used Lefebvre's ideas in the sense that we argue that people should have the (individual) right to self-determination with regard to their own mobility. However, we are also interested in how collective mobilizations are organized, not by definition in an old-school way of 'formal' social movements, but also in a less defined way of collective statements made by the urban poor through their decisions to move or stay put, as in Marianne's article. Does that answer your question?

<Vianello Michele> yes it does thank you. Still I think that Lefebvre has more to say in terms of better defining difference. He stresses the idea of individual difference as recollection of individual case that trough repetition becomes evident in public space.

I found the last paragraph in which you reflect on yourselves and your mobility great. Still I am a bit concerned about the lack of long-term direction for this approach, from what I was able to understand in such a short summary. Let me give you an example: Rivke Jaffe's paper is very interesting, but (I am sorry if I mistake something but I just had access to the summary) it has a ver...; I don't want to fragment what seems to be a very layered (!) question. I've seen and agree. I hope my different perspective can be useful for you. I really think that urbanism needs a shift towards qualitative approaches to some extent. I just wanted to hear from your
perspective whether this makes sense or would conflict with the very nature of your work. I think you answered brilliantly. I will have to think about it. Thank you.

<Colombijn, Freek> I agree. It is a positive sign that qualitative approaches are becoming more and more accepted in many social sciences (including urban studies, perhaps architecture as well). Anthropologists no longer have a monopoly on qualitative or ethnographic methods. And that's okay. When I write: "I agree", I am not referring to your compliment about a brilliant answer, of course, but to your previous line.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> This kind of communication requires instant communication, but the best critics need time as well. It would be interesting to use qualitative methods also to analyse online interactions. Now we have a question by Justin Kadi.

<Kadi, Justin> Thanks a lot for the very interesting article. You discuss a lot about mobility and the different forms of it. What remained a bit unclear to me is what exactly you mean by "mobilizations". Could you maybe elaborate on the concept a little bit and specify what it means to you?

<Klaufus, Christien> Hi Justin, what we mean by mobilizations is not per definition the formally organized ones, as in the older social movement theories, but attempts to collectively mobilize claims on/in the city, spatially and politically, by using mobility or immobility as a resource. In my case, added-up attempts of the urban poor or marginalized to demonstrate their progress in housing is also a way of mobilizing claims on the city.

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Justin, just to add to Christien... We are interested in how individual movements can cumulatively lead to social change - this is somewhat similar to Asef Bayat’s idea of street politics, that the silent encroachment of the urban poor can eventually impact on urban space in a palimpsestic, cumulative way.

<Kadi, Justin> Thanks for the answer. No further comment from my side.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Wonderful. Thanks to you all. Another Justin, Anthony Barnum, is posing the next question.

<Barnum, Anthony Justin> The article mentions communism and Islamic fundamentalism and how it serves or served as a means of international connections for the poor but also that it generated increased regulation of physical movement by the state. How can or does a mobilization of urban poor respond to even more regulation of movement by the state? Are there any documented ways of avoiding this regulation or getting around it?

<Colombijn, Freek> Hi Justin, thanks for your question. We are not sure what you mean by "documented ways of avoiding regulation"; avoidance of regulations is by definition undocumented. Personally, I found this one of the more interesting points raised in the volume: the negotiation of invisibility as an asset (or how did we put it?). At the same time, there are countless ways, of course, in which people circumvent measures to control mobility. I am sure Rivke or Christien have more to say on this.

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Anthony Justin. Again referring to my own research in Jamaica, there are poorer residents who wish to travel come up with various individual and collective strategies to access the United States (and other countries with increasingly restrictive visa requirements). So for instance, they will travel on each other’s passport (based on the apparently often correct assumption that immigration officers cannot distinguish between different Jamaicans of African descent).

<Barnum, Anthony Justin> Interesting. I was also thinking of the use of graffiti to communicate ideas when for example the Internet was cut as in the Arab Spring as a means of political mobilization.

<Jaffe, Rivke> On another note, an interesting response to increasing surveillance (of mobilities and use of urban space) that we see in cities across the world is the increasing use of “sousveillance”, so urban activists or marginalized groups documenting and publicizing the movements of the state (and especially the police).
Your point about graffiti is very interesting, thanks for that! It also shows how certain forms of "visible"/public communication can be invisible to the state. And as Freek pointed out, it points to the tensions between visibility/invisibility.

<Barnum, Anthony Justin> I haven't heard of sousveillance before I'll have to look into that. Thank you.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Lawrence Bird.

<Bird, Lawrence> Thank you for introducing us to this really intriguing volume of work. There's a very interesting dynamic between mobility and immobility -- you speak of immobile subjectivity, and you make the case that immobility does not necessarily imply powerlessness. For example that a culture shaped in a ghetto travels across the world and represents freedom as it does so. That same dynamic would seem to bear a resonance with the tensions between mobile, dematerializing phenomena of digital culture - digital music files for example - and analogue work. Today we exist in a culture of mash-ups between these worlds. Can you elaborate a little on this with respect to the notion of the immobile subject? And how it is a particularly "urban" phenomenon?

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Lawrence, could you elaborate a bit more on your question? What are you referring to by "analogue work" - the physical artefacts?

<Bird, Lawrence> Sorry, I'm speaking more generally about a cultural condition -- mixes between digital and analogue culture. For example in music, people still scratch records, even though we could just stick with digital files and the visual arts, a lot of work playing with the border between material work and digital.

Sorry if that's a bit obscure, but it speaks to a cultural condition, which goes beyond a simple division of virtual realms of flows of information on the one hand and a material "reality" on the other.

Andrew Merrifield in one of our seminars made the case that today's global urban condition is all about a mixing of these worlds; he used the term concrete abstract.

<Jaffe, Rivke> Thanks for clarifying. I think it is precisely this divide we seek to trouble. Of course the virtual and the material (and the social) are entangled in various ways. "Assemblage", anyone? :-)

So yes, we agree with you that it is useful to concentrate on such "mash-ups" and this was part of our attempt, to show how various forms of mobilities are part of the repertoire of the urban poor.

<Bird, Lawrence> It's interesting also that the imagination of mobility is as important to you as mobility itself... Is that a fair statement? Or do you see any limitations to it -- can our imagined mobility replace a real, effective emancipatory agenda?

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Lawrence, just to add that while we focus strongly on symbolic and virtual aspects of mobility, the specific purchase of one or the other form of mobility would depend on the context. So it is not so much a matter of imagined mobility replacing other forms.

<Bird Lawrence> Understood, thank you!

<Jaffe, Rivke> Also, what would a "real effective emancipatory agenda" be, without imaginaries? Even the most materialist social movement relies on imaginaries.

<Klaufus, Christien> In my case, as long as people are able to PUT themselves on the public agenda through symbolic forms of mobility, it is as valuable to them as physical mobility could be. In the end, the thing they want is to 'get ahead in life'.

<Colombijn, Freek> Just to add, I don't think that virtual mobility can replace physical mobility of urban poor.
<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks for the vivid exchange of views! Very interesting! Now we have a question by Theodosis Lefteris.

<Lefteris, Theodosis> Thank you for this wide-scope introduction to a complex and multifarious issue. I am sure that the whole symposium has generated substantial contributions. On the other hand, my experience and impressions from the contemporary city that goes through a severe economic recession and a generalized crisis, match what is best described in Leos Carax's last movie, Holy Motors (2012): people-actors travel through the city experiencing different identities or even lives; these shifts blur boundaries between reality and surrealism, privileged and impoverished, actors and spectators. Eventually, in this extracorporeal situation, a rich is a garbage collector, and the poor flirts with a model.

Though I agree with the bottom line of the paper that “to the urban poor, what matters most is not mobility or immobility per se, but rather the degree of autonomy”? I would like to hear more opinions on the role of the academia and researches that go beyond travel scholarships or amplifiers of the urban miseries (for example, your references to potential political mobilization?).

<Jaffe, Rivke> Thanks for your question Lefteris. Unfortunately none of us has seen Holy Motors, it sounds great though. Michele previously asked a question about applied research, but you are right that in our introduction we were referring to the possibilities of activist research such as that in which Marianne Maeckelbergh is engaged.

However, I don’t know that our role is so much to be an amplifier of urban misery or a translator for the urban poor, it can also be to indicate the complexity of urban inequalities (rather than only the misery of urban poverty), and to point to our own complicity in reproducing them.

<Lefteris, Theodosis> My question came mostly from the impression I had from some symposiums. The North tends to idealize the South without really offering solutions for example. Relating to Lawrence’s question, it is not the same playing a ghetto tune to cheer up a “white” audience and helping a band of disabled street musicians (Staff Benda Bilili) perform around the globe

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Lefteris, just to answer your question with a question: is it "our" role in the North to offer solutions to the South?

<Lefteris, Theodosis> in a globalized world where we should be enhancing the notion of commons, and the managing of resources, I think yes... in every level and respect...

<Colombijn, Freek> You refer to the general point of engaged anthropology (or engaged scholarship). If you want to speak in terms of a North-South dichotomy, we are interlocutors and perhaps we have something to tell each other. But does the North have to offer solutions?

<Jaffe, Rivke> Just a last point to Lefteris - I absolutely agree that privilege implies responsibility. But the idea that “we” (the rich) need to help “them” (the poor) has also been the source of some of the most problematic forms of development aid.

<Lefteris, Theodosis> Well, this is a good point Freek... we normally tend to theorize more than putting things in practice. Dichotomies certainly do not help

<Colombijn, Freek> Well, dichotomies help to structure our thoughts, but as soon as we put them up, we must break them down.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Ok. let us proceed with the next question by Davide Caselli.

<Caselli, Davide> Hi, in the end of your interesting article, you put it in theoretical perspective and describe it as a bridge between studies in the "political economy of the city" and studies in "processes of meaning-making". I find this goal very interesting. In the text I was very interested by the Ecuadorian case, for two
reasons. 1) it reminded me of the case of "excessive citizenship" we discussed last time about upper class Argentinians and 2) it looks quite a case of cultural subalternity (in Gramsci's or Freire's terms) face to the upper class, a sort of mimicry of its cultural features, quite diffused among the poor. I'd like to know more about the socio-political imaginary developed in that community. To try to bridge the two theoretical approaches: have you found a mix of cultural subalternity combined to socio-political consciousness or the (at least apparent) subaltern cultural identity was combined with a subaltern or little-developed class consciousness and political agency? Thank you.

<Klaufus, Christien> Hi Davide, to be clear: we did not suggest a dichotomy between socio-political approaches and culturalist approaches. We wanted to demonstrate that the integration of both cultural and socio-economic perspectives is possible and necessary to understand a multidisciplinary theme such as mobility.

With regard to the Ecuadorian case: people used cultural repertoires to improve their livelihood, their lived experience was what I studied, but of course there are power differences between the residents in the rich parts of the cities and themselves, of which they are aware.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> We have less than 20 minutes left, so we need to go on with the next questions.

<Marzorati, Roberta> A question from Alessandro Coppola, who is online but can't post question because of some technical problems. He says "Thank you for this very interesting article. I was wondering if in the conceptualization of the issue you paid any attention to the issue of mobility as a policy tool. I'm referring more specifically to poverty de-concentration strategies that have involved a strong focus on "moving the poor around". And I was also curious about a pretty bold statement contained in the article: that the political economy approach is alternative to what you define as the "culturalist" approach. I personally think they are not necessarily alternative. I wanted to know your opinions."

<Klaufus, Christien> Hi Roberta and Alessandro, from my (Latin American) perspective, in many regions of the world, the poor are not "moved around", but by lack of options they cluster in favelas or similar areas. Policies are aimed at reducing the disorder in those places, not at spreading the problems related to urban poverty, as is often done in European (and especially in Dutch) cities.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Would the authors like to add some further comments?

<Jaffe, Rivke> I think Christien more or less just answered this question in her response to Davide... we do not see political economy as incompatible with culturalist approaches, rather we seek to bridge this divide.

<Marzorati Roberta> Thank you from me and Alessandro

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Very good! Now it is James Thomson:

<Thompson, James> You mentioned the international connections constructed around the imaginative movements of communism and Islamic fundamentalism, and how these struck fear in the elite and middle classes. How should we understand the worldwide democracy movements of the past couple years (Arab Spring, Occupy, and the various European anti-austerity protest movements)? To what degree should they be characterized as "urban poor movements"? Do you think they'll leave a legacy comparable to communism and Islamic fundamentalism?

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi James, thanks for your question. I think what is interesting about some of these recent social movements is that they are (or at least started out as) cross-class social movements. What the legacy of these (in many ways very different) movements will be remains to be seen, of course? Just speaking from Amsterdam, Occupy did not appear to strike fear in the hearts of the elite at all.

<Colombijn, Freek> Thanks for another stimulating question, James. To add to Rivke, you throw together a couple of movements that seem quite different. In the case of Occupy, here in Amsterdam people joined Occupy
in the morning and at the end of the day, on their way to their office or back home. It seemed to be a very middle-class thing. Others went there for fun, just to watch. But it was a quite different thing, I guess, in Spain. There the biggest fear, to the best of my knowledge, was of the middle class to slip into poverty. It was fear about their own status. Not fear of the urban poor.

But I am on slippery ground here, basing myself on what I have seen in Amsterdam (on the way to my office) and read in the newspapers.

<Jaffe, Rivke> I'm not sure if you have read Marianne Maeckelbergh's article in this symposium, but her current research is very much about the parallels (and connections) between these different movements in Europe, North America and the Middle East. So you might be interested in following her current research.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Now we have a question by Lawrence Bird, which recalls some concepts already expressed above, and new perspectives.

<Bird, Lawrence> Earlier questions touched on distinctions and differences between experiences of poverty. "The urban poor", the term at the heart of your symposium, is a very broad one -- perhaps of necessity, to integrate work from many researchers. This is a very general question and perhaps the answer can only be "it depends on the context", but do you have any comments on how the work you discuss impacts on different kinds or classes of poverty? For example, precarious knowledge/creative workers in Europe vs. residents of a favela... Is it possible to identify for whom these issues are most crucial?

<Klaufus, Christien> Hi Lawrence, the case studies in this symposium indeed deal with various groups of "urban poor". Our intention was to understand possibilities and restrictions that all underprivileged people face, with our focus on mobility - in various forms - as a resource. In that sense, it could also be used to understand the possibilities and restrictions of other social groups, such as creative workers.

<Jaffe, Rivke> Yes, as Christien says, while we are in full agreement with you that "the urban poor" is a highly diverse group, we have sought to identify how different forms of im/mobility are enabling or limiting for underprivileged groups.

<Bird, Lawrence> Understood. Thank you for a very enlightening seminar!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> We have few more minutes and a long question by Max Rousseau!

<Rousseau, Max> Thanks for this very interesting article. I was wondering if at the local scale, the shift in the requirements of local capitalists is not an element in order to understand the changes of the regulation of the poor. For example in the industrial cities, for a long period local capitalists who needed a stable workforce tried to regulate the mobilities at a narrow scale through the use of many instruments (affordable housing, public amenities and so on). On the contrary, in these now-deindustrializing cities, the new capitalist class asks for a strategy aiming at accelerating the daily mobilities of the population. According to the urban planners I met in these kind of former industrial cities, the (perceived) low degree of mobility of the poor (inherited from the industrial period) appears as a crucial problem for the local economic development and they precisely try to fix it through the use of other instruments (such as public transport and so on). I was wondering what you would say about this kind of political-economic approach of the regulation of the mobilities of the urban poor?

<Jaffe, Rivke> Hi Max, great question!

<Colombijn, Freek> You're absolutely right. And if city managers (whoever they might be) do not manage to mobilize their city (in a physical sense -e.g. have traffic jams- or virtually), capitalists will become mobile and move to other urban spaces that are better connected globally.

<Jaffe, Rivke> I think you are correct about the historical role of local capitalists in trying to concentrate and stabilize a pool of uneducated urban labor - this is also related to Wacquant's (and other people's) work on the
role of the ghetto is US industrial cities.

<Colombijn, Freek> And popular housing provided near factories and ports in European colonies in Africa and Asia. But that is all something of the past.

<Jaffe, Rivke> The flexibilization that characterizes many contemporary urban economies also involves, as you say, a demand for labor to be spatially flexible, i.e. mobile.

<Klaufus, Christien> Hi Max, in Peru there is an interesting phenomenon taking place, that foreign companies (Chinese) taking over mines are constructing new company towns. They replace their labour force to those new towns, where they should live and work. They are not encouraged to be mobile but to be part and parcel of that company town. So that is the opposite trend.

<Rousseau, Max> Thank you very much for your answers!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Very many thanks to our three authors for our meeting today.

<Colombijn, Freek> My pleasure. We really enjoyed it.

<Jaffe, Rivke> Thank you for all your extremely stimulating questions!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> I thank all participants as well for having taken part in this initiative.

<Klaufus, Christien> I like to thank all of you too! It was very inspiring.

<Jaffe, Rivke> And thanks to Giovanni for moderating! Hope we may meet again in the physical realm :)

<Torrisi, Giovanni> We will keep in touch for further projects! Best Wishes to you all!

<Klaufus, Christien> Bye and many thanks!