

Balancing between ,Here' and ,There'. A Relational Perspective on Migrants' Lives between Place Attachment and Mobility

abstract:

In the paper I present the central results of a research project on the nexus of place attachment and mobility of highly qualified international migrants. Based on empirical data obtained from narrative interviews with highly qualified international migrants and ethnographic interviews with informants from the scene, I show that repeatedly migrating people develop forms of place attachment at their temporary places of residency which can be understood as a mode of stabilising and homogenising hybrid identities; here, constituting spaces and integrating objects as constitutive components in their practices of staying and moving are key.

Today, we observe a, in qualitative terms significant, group of highly qualified people who repeatedly cross national borders in their professional lives. This has societal consequences, grasped for example by Zygmunt Bauman (e.g. 1996, 1997, 1998, 2003, 2005) with his description of so-called ,tourists' and ,vagabonds' as key social figures. Building on this conceptually helpful dichotomy of voluntary versus forced migration, I focus on those ,tourists' and ask how they balance between transnational mobility and localized place attachment. My data show that the interviewees develop specific social and spatial practices to establish local ties and an identity which is stable enough to withstand the repeated changes of relocation and, connected with this, repeated processes of ,uprooting and regrounding' (Ahmed et al. 2003). Here, objects play a key role for both mobility and place attachment, suggesting a relational perspective (Callon 1986, Latour 2007) on the nexus of place attachment and mobility.

Balancing between 'Here' and 'There'. A Relational Perspective on Migrants' Lives between Place Attachment and Mobility

Thank you. What I present today are selected results of a research project that I carried out during the last years. My main focus was the nexus of place attachment and mobility in the case of highly qualified international migrants.

There was a general observation I started with: In late modern societies, we observe a, at least in qualitative terms significant, group of highly qualified people who repeatedly cross national borders in their professional lives. This spatial mobility of work force has consequences, not only for the people themselves and the employment sector, but also for the receiving and the sending societies. Several aspects of this mobility are interesting for a social geographer: the scales of the mobility, the effects it has on employment structures or the working culture in an enterprise, the role that this mobility plays in people's biographies and social environment. But two things interested me most: the question in what sense highly mobile people establish forms of place attachment and what kind of identities they form in the course of their spatially – and also socially – mobile lives.

As starting point for my research I used Zygmunt Bauman's conceptually helpful dichotomy of voluntary versus forced migration. Bauman (e.g. 1996, 1997, 1998) states a rather polar postmodern world when it comes to mobility. He identifies two main groups: he calls them 'tourists' and 'vagabonds'. These terms are well chosen as tourists are those people who migrate because they choose to do so, whereas vagabonds migrate because they have to – in a sense, they also choose to migrate, but they choose because it is essential for their survival. In contrast, the tourists choose to migrate because they want to accept a promising job offer, climb higher on the social ladder or want to discover new places.

Of course you can question the voluntariness of such voluntary migration and highlight that we currently also have a highly formative discourse on mobility and a societal demand in certain employment sectors, such as academia, to be spatially mobile. And there is always also an aspect of voluntariness in forced migration. But this is not my point here. I build on Bauman's dichotomy of voluntary versus forced migration to ask how voluntarily migrating people balance between recurring international mobility and localized place attachments and form particular migrant identities.

So what data did I use to address these two questions? I obtained the data from narrative interviews with highly qualified international migrants and ethnographic interviews with

informants from the scene. In total, these were 19 narrative interviews and half a dozen of ethnographic interviews during my fieldwork.

In a nutshell, the data revealed that migrating people develop forms of place attachment at their temporary places of residency for which spatial practices and integrating objects as constitutive components in their practices of staying and moving are key. Furthermore, these forms of place attachments can be understood as a mode of stabilising and homogenising their identities. These identities are hybrid and comprise traits stemming from their individual socialization and biographies as well as from their migration biographies and a collective socialization in communities of international migrants.

In more detail, my data show that the interviewees develop specific social and spatial practices which they employ to establish local ties to create an attachment to their places of residency. They also use them to form an identity which is stable enough to withstand the repeated relocations and, connected to this, to withstand repeated processes of 'uprooting and regrounding', as Sara Ahmed and her colleagues call it (Ahmed et al. 2003). Interestingly, objects play a key role for both mobility and place attachment and for the formation of identities. This has led me, as the title of my presentation suggests, to consider my perspective on the nexus of place attachment and mobility as a relational one, to borrow a term used by, among others, Michael Callon (1986) or Bruno Latour (2007).

I now want to elaborate more on the findings. As common thread for this presentation I use the constitution of spaces and the role of material culture.

Part I: Place attachment and mobility

Highly qualified international migrants develop particular forms of place attachment at their temporary places of residency. They develop certain spatial practices to form these attachments, and they integrate objects in their practices of staying and moving and thus in their balancing between 'here' and 'there'.

In general, the lives of people who migrate repeatedly is characterized by staying and leaving or, from a different perspective, by coming and going. Balancing between staying here and going there means to have multiple local points of reference: the place where you currently live and where you lived before, but also the places where you grew up or your parents live or where you would like to live in the future. To use a phrase by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2007, e.g. 127): my interviewees live a locally polygamous life. To my interviewee Sven, this means to, quote, "fit in anywhere, but to be nowhere at home" (Sven, Pos. 118). This feeling of in-between-ness is what characterizes Bauman's 'tourists' as social figures of late modern, in a

way globalized, societies. However, such a life also points to what is in-between: a transnational social space that spans across locales. My interviewees span their lives between different places in different countries and employ particular spatial and social practices that they have developed in the course of their mobile lives. The transnational social space is made out of networks: networks of people, of memories or desires, of experiences, of objects. The network differ in strength and dimension, but what they share is that they are constitutive elements of the migrants' ways to balance between 'here' and 'there'. Balancing between places and people, between place attachment and mobility, between networks and locales goes together with a specific attitude towards life and is part of a specific identity as I will show in a minute. This attitude is very similar to what Elliott and Urry (original emphasis 2010, 4) describe:

Life "on the move" is the kind of life in which the capacity to be "elsewhere" at a different time from others is central. [...] Such mobile lives demand flexibility, adaptability, reflexivity – to be ready for the unexpected, to embrace novelty, as even one's significant others are doing different things and at different times. People's experiences are de-synchronized from each other, so that systems and people have to be available "just-in-time."

The very flexibility that Elliott and Urry emphasize here is conceived of very differently by my interviewees. While it is a positive aspect of her mobile life to Rieke, it is a societal demand imposed on her and her family for Dora, making it harder to live at a place because she constantly stands at attention because her or her husband's job might make it necessary to move again. In contrast, adaptability and reflexivity are two traits of the migrants' personality that are conceived of as positive throughout the interviews. As part of what I call a pluralistic value system, they are in fact constitutive for my interviewees' identities.

Part II: Hybrid identities

I understand identities here as dynamic and multiple: an identity transforms over the lifetime of an individual, and an individual always has different distinguishable traits of identity. The identities of my interviewees are specific: they are the identities of highly qualified international migrants. And this identity is one of many in each case: They are always also the son or daughter of their parents, the singer in their choir or the team mate in their sports club, but also the employee or the politically informed citizen. Their identity as highly qualified international migrant is in particular formed by the spatialities of their lives, and this makes

their case so interesting for a social geographer. In addition to its processual character – that is: changing in particular ways over a live time – the identities are characterized by the spatiality of international, that is: cross-border, migration. The identities are in a constant process of reconstruction and reconfiguration. In a way, my interviewees are constantly engaged in narrations about who they are. And the interviews with me are a constitutive part of this narration and, connected to that, the constant formation of their identity. So Sarah’s answer on her own rhetoric question is exactly such kind of a narration about her self:

If you ask me what am I? Who am I? What is my nationality? I would say I am born in Britain, [...] I was brought up there with occasional trips elsewhere, but I do not feel British and we never did. We didn’t quite understand why we didn’t fit in at school and that was because our parents didn’t grow up in that country and so they didn’t have the same cultural background. And so you don’t quite fit in because you haven’t got the cultural references. So you’re a gipsy once you’ve lived in one or two different places, you always itch. It’s just the way it is. (Sarah, Pos. 170-176)

These identities are fundamentally connected to the practice of balancing between staying and going, between place attachment and mobility that I presented earlier. Sven puts it like this:

to find a balance and to see until which point can I go and how long can I stand that and what can I balance, what can I do that is close enough to do what I want [to do] and still give me some kind of stability. (Sven, Pos. 347-353)

Ulrich Beck (2007, 131) calls identities that stem from international biographies locally polygamous and translated. In this quote, which I translated badly myself, he plays with the German word for translating, *übersetzen*, which can also mean „to ferry someone or something across the river“:

Whether voluntarily or forced or both – people span their lives across separate worlds. Locally polygamous lifestyles are translated [*übersetzte*] biographies, biographies ferried across places [*übergesetzte Biographien*], [...] that have to translate continuously for themselves and others to be able to exist as lives-in-between.ⁱ

Traits of identity

4 traits characterize this hybrid identity:

(1) a particular way to balance between here and there; (2) a pluralistic value system; (3) a particular embeddedness in the international community with its collectively shared treasure trove of experience; (4) and practices of creating locally specific place attachment. From a relational perspective, it is of particular relevance how people, places and objects related to each other to form these migrant identities. I highlight here the role of objects.

Objects

Objects play a major role for my interviewees. They are a marker for their personal identity, they signal – especially themselves – that there is stability in their lives and in their personal identity. Sven carries a photograph of his male ancestors with him; Dora keeps her beloved clothing from her life in the US, long ago, in the storage room of every single flat she lives in. But objects can also be markers for less positive aspects of a live as international migrant: Ryan feels very fragmented by his spatially mobile live, and the fact that his belongings are scattered over different places contributes to his personal feeling of individual, social and spatial fragmentation.

Furthermore, objects can be symbols. In this case, their meanings require a shared understanding. Passports or certificates are examples for objects-as-symbols, and many scholars have pointed to the relevance of these objects particularly for migrants. People then use these objects to connect to a shared lifeworld that transcends space and time.

What is particularly interesting to me is that objects themselves have what I call a situational biography (Müller 2018). I relate here to Igor Kopytoff's (1986) concept of the cultural biography of objects: the same object has different meaning in different cultural contexts. The situational biography of objects means that the same objects can obtain different meanings for the same person in the course of the migration biography. Dora buys clothes in the US that fit her and that are suitable for the climate in Florida. The trousers and T-shirts are functional; and maybe she encounters particularly memorable situations when wearing a particular T-shirt or skirt. During her time in the US, the clothes have a particular meaning to her. Then she moves: first to Germany, then to Switzerland, then to the place in Switzerland where she currently lives. The weather is different, her body has changed, her social status has changed: no longer single, but mom of two kids and wife. But she still has the clothes in the basement. They don't fit anymore, as she tells me, but she moves them every time she moves herself. Now, they have an emotional value: She keeps them "for memory", as she puts it. And this is the situational biography of an object: The object "T-shirt" changes its values for Dora depending on the situation, depending on the phase in her life. And here we also see the interconnectedness of

time and space: the situational value of the object changes over time, and as the different *phases* in the migrants' lives are often simultaneously different *places* in their lives, the situational value of an object changes also over space.

Consequently, the identities of the objects are as dynamic as the migrants' identities. Their meanings are time and space specific. This is particularly true for objects that travel with the migrants, that have their own migration biographies. In these cases, as in Doras, the objects accompany the migrants over a long period of time and change in meanings because the migrants change themselves, because their spatial and social practices and their lifestyles change. As a consequence, the migrants' ways of using the objects change: The migrants integrate the objects into their practices in different ways, thus allowing for a different form of "material participation", to borrow a concept by Noortje Marres (2012, 2).

Conclusion

To sum up: People who repeatedly migrate across territorial borders employ certain social and spatial practices to establish forms of place attachment at their temporary places of residency. For these practices, objects are constitutive and have particular biographies that I call situational. Furthermore, these place attachments can be understood as a mode of stabilising and homogenising the migrants' identities. Their identities are hybrid and comprise traits stemming from their individual socialization and biographies as well as from their migration biographies and a collective socialization in communities of international migrants.

References

- Ahmed, Sara, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, eds. 2003. *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1996. 'Tourists and Vagabonds : Heroes and Victims of Postmodernity'. 30. Reihe Politikwissenschaft. Wien: Institut für Höhere Studien Wien. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-266870>.
- . 1997. *Flaneure, Spieler Und Touristen. Essays Zu Postmodernen Lebensformen*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.
- . 1998. 'Schwache Staaten. Globalisierung Und Die Spaltung Der Weltgesellschaft'. In *Kinder Der Freiheit*, edited by Ulrich Beck, 315–32. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Beck, Ulrich. 2007. *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus - Antworten auf Globalisierung*. 1. Aufl., [Nachdr.]. Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch 3867. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Callon, Michel. 1986. 'Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Briec Bay'. In *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge? Sociological Review Monograph*, 196–229. Keele, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Elliott, Anthony, and John Urry. 2010. *Mobile Lives*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process'. In *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 64–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Eine Neue Soziologie Für Eine Neue Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Marres, Noortje. 2012. *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9780230232112>.
- Müller, Anna-Lisa. 2018. 'Zwischen Hier Und Dort. Internationale Migration, Ortsbindung Und Materielle Kultur'. Habilitation. Bremen.

- i „Ob freiwillig oder gezwungen oder beides – die Menschen spannen ihr Leben über getrennte Welten hin auf. Ortspolygame Lebensformen sind übersetzte, übergesetzte Biographien, Übersetzungs-Biographien, die für sich und andere fortwährend übersetzen müssen, damit sie als Dazwischen-Leben bestehen können.“ (Beck 2007, 131)