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Shock mobility: convulsions in human migration are having large impacts

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Abstract

Shock mobilities are sudden human movements in response to acute disruptions. They can be short lived, but may have long lasting impacts.

Keywords

risk, crisis, “link-moment”, reaction (im)mobility, survival mobility, limbo mobility, substitution mobility

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Shock mobilities are sudden human movements in response to acute disruptions. After the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 24 March 2020, for instance, according to the Indian government, 7.5 million internal migrants flocked home in desperation by 23 May.² Many walked for days due to the lack of public transport. When the global epicentre of the virus moved from Asia to Europe in March, and, subsequently, the US, students from Asia, particularly China, rushed to leave the new hotspots for home.³ Air travel prices hiked ten-fold overnight. Many students bought multiple tickets at a time⁴, anticipating that some of the flights would be cancelled, while some were stranded in transit, having to later be evacuated. As of 3 April, 200,000 students had returned, leaving 1.4 million more waiting to go home.⁵

Shock mobility encompasses degrees of forced migration, distress migration, “acute refugee movement”⁶, and migration induced by “acute changes”⁷. All of these movements can be categorized as incidents of “reactive migration,” namely migration caused by “a state of panic facing a crisis situation which leaves few alternatives but escape from intolerable threats”.⁸ Forced migration often starts with shock mobility, but shock mobility does not always lead to protracted forced migration.

While most research rightly focuses on long-term displacement that requires settlement solutions, shock mobility is often overlooked – an oversight that has gained immense new relevance in this present moment of rapid worldwide movement unlike anything seen before in modern history. A greater focus could unpack the short-lived nature of these mobilities, and explore their consequences other than refugee migrations.

In this essay I will first outline why shock mobility deserves more policy and academic attention. I then suggest that shock mobility must be understood in relation to other mobilities – as a “link-moment” in mobility assemblages. This is followed by snapshot descriptions of five empirical manifestations of the “link-moment”. The “link-moment” perspective also sheds light on possible long-term implications of shock mobilities, which I turn to at the end.

Short-Lived, but with Long After-Lives

Shock mobilities save lives but can inflict harm, too. Thousands fled Milan in early March to avoid cordon sanitaire; the governor of Calabria called the southward exodus an act of “madness” and urged the national government to stop it.⁹ In China, an estimated 300,000 residents left Wuhan

² 4 crore migrant workers in India; 75 lakh return home so far: MHA. *The Tribune* (India). 23 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/4-crore-migrant-workers-in-india-75-lakh-return-home-so-far-mha-88940>. Last accessed on 14 January 2021.

³ Kirton, David and Ryan Woo. 2020. Chinese students flock home as coronavirus shuts Western campuses. *Reuters*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-students/chinese-students-flock-home-as-coronavirus-shuts-western-campuses-idUSKBN2150J4>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

⁴ Chinese students fleeing virus face uneasy reception back home. *The Japan Times*. 5 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/05/asia-pacific/chinese-students-fleeing-virus-face-uneasy-reception-back-home/#.XuCxRUZKi00>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

⁵ Data reveals the current situation of overseas Chinese students during the pandemic. (Chinese). *Beijing Daily*. 3 April 2020. Available online at: <https://news.sina.cn/gn/2020-04-03/detail-iimxyqwa4986553.d.html?from=wap> Last accessed 14 January 2021.

⁶ Kunz, Egon F. 1973. The refugee in flight: kinetic models and forms of displacement. *International Migration Review* 7(2): 125–146.

⁷ van Hear, Nicolas. 1998. *New diasporas: the mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*. London: Routledge/University College London Press.

⁸ Richmond, Anthony H. 1988. Sociological theories of international migration: the case of refugees. *Current Sociology* 36(2):7–25. Page 17.

⁹ Kington, Tom. 2020. As Italy extends quarantine zone, many flee; angry officials tell them to go back. *Los Angeles Times*. 8 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-08/italy-extends-quarantine-across-north-many-flee>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

between 2:00a.m. on 23 January 2020, when lockdown was announced, and 10:00 a.m. when public transport was halted – more than a quarter of a million people in eight hours.¹⁰ Wuhan residents were angry about the timing of when the policy was publicized, which gave them little time to prepare. Citizens outside of Wuhan, however, criticized the government for not enforcing lockdown immediately, arguing that panic flights could have spread the virus even further.

Thus, shock mobilities are complex. Do these frantic movements expand the disease, or dilute the density of infection? Are the panic flights actually panicked, or merely rational? Do these movements undermine government measures of disease control, or do they serve government campaigns by waking up the public to the severity of the pandemic? But as it stands, we are not able to address any of these questions, because we know too little about the patterns, duration, density, demographic composition, and temporal dynamics of shock mobilities.

Yet even so, shocks more widely conceived are an increasingly important part of our contemporary life beyond pandemics – another reason why they demand further attention. As Ulrich Beck argued, we produce not only wealth, but, also, risks.¹¹ The more wealth we create, the more potential shocks we must face. “Black Swans” – low-probability but high-impact risks built into the prevalent business model – shock the economic system more and more frequently.¹² And each of these disruptions bring about convulsions in human mobilities. Therefore, shock mobility may become the “new normal” soon enough, and perhaps than no longer “shock.” Shock mobilities are not only testimonies of how human experience the turmoil, the movements are also critical means by which people handle acute hardship and are indispensable in pulling societies out of modern-day crises.

But how many of us remember the dramatic changes in mobilities in the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2008 Great Recession, the 2013 tsunami in Japan, or the 2018 Ebola outbreak? The very fact that many shocks appear short-lived – and that the associated shock mobilities are quickly forgotten – renders shocks an even more important topic for examination. Shocks, Naomi Klein argues, have been instrumental for ruling elite to push through radical neoliberal policies across the world since the 1970s.¹³ Disasters distracted the public from scrutinizing and resisting socially corrosive policies. No wonder the economy “recovers” from crises quickly – shocks are meant to pave the way for the introduction of this “new normal.”

Capitalism is “eventful,” driven by contingent happenings that are irreversibly transformative. But capitalism is also strangely repetitive. William Sewell, who had called our attention to the eventfulness of capitalism, recently had a second thought: “the occurrence of events in social life, of unexpected happenings of any sort, is for capital above all an opportunity for new sources of profit.” (p. 525)¹⁴ According to him, capitalism is “simultaneously still and hyper-eventful.” (p. 517) Then, which shocks may be transformative? Which shocks may hold back changes? And yet which events push the society in a direction set by some at the cost of others?

These questions are especially pertinent today. Discussions on shock mobilities – how they are conditioned by existing conditions; how they end and give way to apparent normalcy; and how they

¹⁰ XU Xiao-ke, WEN Cheng, ZHANG Guang-yao, SUN Hao-chen, LIU Bo and WANG Xian-wen. 2020. The geographical destination distribution and effect of outflow population of Wuhan when the outbreak of COVID-19. *Journal of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China*. 49(3): 324–329. Available online at: <http://www.juestc.uestc.edu.cn/en/article/doi/10.12178/1001-0548.2020033>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

¹¹ Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk society: towards a new modernity*. Sage Publications.

¹² Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2007. *The black swan: the impact of the highly improbable*. London: Penguin.

¹³ Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*. Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company.

¹⁴ Sewell Jr., William H. 2005. *Logics of history. Social theory and social transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

alter social relations – will enable us to draw broad insights with lasting values from dramatic happenings that have to come define our lives. This is a methodological challenge, as well as a theoretical one. We will need to conceptualize shock mobility, as well as mobility in general, in new ways from this point forward.

A “Link-Moment” in Mobility Assemblages

Shock mobility, by definition, defies conceptual stabilization. Unlike student migration, economic migration, or circular migration, shock mobility cannot be defined by the actor, the cause, or the behavioural pattern.

Shock mobility can instead be conceptualized as a link between various movements, and a moment when different mobilities intensively entangle with each other. These interrelated mobilities, of different actors as well as particular actors at different times, constitute what could be called ‘mobility assemblages.’ The key concern here is how shock mobilities are related to – and, in turn, change – other movements.

Consider the journey of a migrant family who walked across India at the pandemic’s onset mentioned earlier. They were not “shocked” into mobility. They are always mobile in the first place. Typically circular migrants, they move back and forth between cities and home villages seasonally or annually. In the city, they are constantly on the move as street vendors, delivery workers, domestic servants, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, or garbage pickers – the moment they stop moving is the moment they lose their jobs. And as daily wagers, they have no money to pay the rent or buy food once that happens. Going home by whatever means is the only way to survive.

They were pushed into shock mobilities because the pandemic and lockdown *disrupted* their rhythms of mobility. The migrants lost jobs not because they wanted to isolate themselves. The jobs were taken away from them because the government and urban residents were eager to halt mobility. Thus, migrants’ shock mobilities must be understood in relation to their other migratory practices, and other actors’ mobility and immobility.

Shock mobilities mean different things to different populations, and the ‘link-moment’ perspective helps us to understand the discrepancies better. Consider the contrast between rich residents’ move to their second houses and migrant workers’ rush to home. The wealthy can move to their holiday homes away from the pandemic’s epicentre to shield themselves from infection; a movement effective in protecting themselves, and seemingly legitimate as they simply continue to do what they usually do. Who can really accuse anyone for moving to one’s own property? But at the other end of the cascade of shock waves, migrants are pushed into sudden mobilities by others’ shocks. Their long march exposed them to multiple life-threatening risks – among which virus was, in fact, a minor one – and subjected them to even harsher stigmatization and police brutality, as they were perceived as the key vector of the virus on the move. The rich and the poor have different experiences not only because they have more or less resources, but also because their mobilities are positioned in the mobility assemblage differently.

What the “Link-Moment” Looks Like

Following that logic, I observe that shock mobility as a “link-moment” in mobility assemblages has five specific forms:

Reaction mobility is a direct response to threats. Anthropological research suggests that running away is the most common reaction to high-mortality epidemics across cultures.¹⁵ But the imposition of a cordon sanitaire seems to have induced even more intensified and larger-scale population flights.¹⁶ Information from different parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic seems to suggest that citizens’ mistrust towards the government is more important than perceptions about health risks in causing reaction mobilities.

Reaction immobility is a critical part of shock mobility. After all, the concept of shock mobility is about sudden mutations in movement rather than mobility, per se. Immobilization is more dramatic than movement. Observations on the COVID-19 pandemic point to two populations who have been most dispositioned to reaction immobility. First, urban middle class isolated themselves because they were sensitive to health risks, and can afford to stay at home. And second, rural communities were quick in setting up checkpoints and even building walls around villages because, due to poor healthcare facilities, physical isolation appeared to be the only thing that they could do to protect themselves.

Survival mobility is necessary for those who lost livelihoods due to mobility restrictions. Going home is a typical means of survival mobility, regardless how inhospitable that ‘home’ may be. By late May, over 68,000 Venezuelans had returned to their crisis-ridden country, where they had previously desperately fled from.¹⁷ As all the seven official border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia had closed, criminal groups reportedly smuggled migrants back into Venezuela.

Limbo mobility, namely movements without destinations and even stoppages, became widespread during the pandemic as well. People in shock mobilities are ill-prepared in terms of where they want to reach and how, and they are turned away by communities along the way due to fears around the virus. Wuhan, for instance, witnessed a sizable homeless population who could not leave the city for home or check into hotels. They moved between parks, railway stations and hospitals in particular, in order to access food, water and covered space for the night. In India, the central challenge quickly shifted from stopping mobility to *moving* migrants to their home place. The Supreme Court ordered all local governments to provide free food and transport to migrants and directed again on June 9 that

¹⁵ McGrath, Janet W. 1991. Biological impact of social disruption resulting from epidemic disease. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 84: 407–419.

¹⁶ Rothstein, Mark A., M. Gabriela Alcalde, Nanette R. Elster, Mary Anderlik Majumder, Larry I. Palmer, T. Howard Stone and Richard E. Hoffman. 2003. *Quarantine and isolation: lessons learned from SARS*. United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available online at: https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/blaw/cdc/SARS_REPORT.pdf. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

¹⁷ Idler, Annette and Markus Hochmüller. 2020. Venezuelan migrants face crime, conflict and coronavirus at Colombia’s closed border. *The Conversation*. 5 June 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/venezuelan-migrants-face-crime-conflict-and-coronavirus-at-colombias-closed-border-137743>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

all migrants should be brought home within 15 days.¹⁸ Across the world, between 150,000 and 200,000 seafarers are trapped on board ships as of June 2020 because of port closure.¹⁹

Substitution mobility, namely the movements that are carried out by some groups on behalf of others, is crucial during the lockdown. Substitution mobility can be organized by government. For instance, Chinese government “sent down”—literally “sank” (*xiacheng*)—cadres to grassroots communities to act as delivery workers. Similar initiatives are taken up by volunteers across the world as drivers and delivery personnel. Platform-based technology companies, specifically on transport or delivery platforms, play a central role in organizing substitution mobility, too.

Future Implications

Considering these five manifestations of shock mobilities as ‘link-moments’ provides clues as to how shock mobilities may affect broader socioeconomic relations in the future. For instance, to villagers who adopt a strategy of reaction immobility, migrants’ survival mobility by returning home could pose serious threats. The rush of Chinese students abroad back home has already created national controversies.

Substitution mobilities are likely to further the casualization of labour (especially for delivery workers) and the securitization of mobilities, as more and more movement falls under constant monitoring by either the state or platform companies – even though these mobilities are indispensable in carrying us through the shocks and providing some sense of normalcy. In turn, they can be quickly normalized. The Chinese government encouraged labour dispatchment in the wake of the SARS outbreak in 2003 in order to channel workers from enterprises who lost production orders to those who needed labour, in a period of economic uncertainty and mobility restriction. By 2008, labour dispatchment was codified. Now, the practice is so common that it is hardly associated with any shocks.

How these mobilities are received and internalized in the years ahead is uncertain. But what we do know is that these experiences could yield significant impacts on state-citizen relations, as well as relations between different populations. The “shocks” give us a glimpse into the world we’re entering. Tomorrow’s normalcy will grow out of today’s disruption. Therefore, a better understanding of ongoing shock mobilities will help us analyse potential problems for decades to come.

¹⁸ Coronavirus India lockdown day 77 updates. *The Hindu*. 9 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-coronavirus-lockdown-june-9-2020-live-updates/article31784353.ece>. Last accessed 14 January 2021.

¹⁹ International Labour Organization. 2020. *Press release: release more than 150,000 seafarers trapped on board ships due to COVID-19*. 8 June 2020. Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/WCMS_374809/lang--en/index.htm. Last accessed 14 January 2021.