

Workshop concept note

“Migration-mobility studies as social critique”

13-15 July 2023

This workshop will explore ways of developing migration-mobility studies as social critique, by which we mean analysis that reveals social contradictions as people experience them, for instance in the form of shared personal dilemmas (Should one move overseas for the sake of children’s education at the cost of family support? Should one migrate to earn money quickly, or stay put to develop a social base for long-term development? Is it ethical to leave a morally problematic environment to protect one’s integrity rather than confronting the problems?). Social critique analyses the causes, patterns and implications of such dilemmas, and explores why people often desire to overcome the predicament they find themselves in, yet at the same time perpetuate it through their own behaviour. By surfacing these contradictions, social critique can enrich people’s self-understanding and empower them to seek change. In Marx’s (1843) words, social critique is “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.”

Social critique must be immanent critique, that is, based on the perspective of those who are living through the specific situation, rather than predefined from the outside. It articulates what people already find problematic about their life circumstances. In this sense it differs both from intellectual critique and from political criticism. Intellectual critique challenges established categories such as “nation”, “border” or “identity”, but it is unclear how such conceptual deconstruction can help migrants in developing strategies for action and building a new life. Meanwhile, political criticism from the Left challenges the legitimacy of the institutions that sustain border controls, discrimination, and inequality and yet it does not necessarily empower migrants to think or act differently because it tends to treat their experience as an object to be analysed, rather than as the epistemological basis for analysis. In fact, while the social science literature on migration in English has become increasingly radical after 2008, in many countries policy makers and public opinion have shifted in the opposite direction and become more hostile towards migrants. Social critique aims to clarify contradictions in a way that will facilitate self-understanding on the part of migrants as well as broader publics.

Migration-mobility studies and social critique

Migration-mobility studies offers fertile ground for developing immanent critique. This is partly because migration is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities. Migrants are acutely aware of the social problems they face, but do not typically resist or rebel. Instead, they learn to navigate through contradictions as insiders. This ambiguity leads us to ask questions like: Why do migrants participate in a system that they themselves regard as unjust and contrary to their interests? What has prevented them from acting according to their ethical judgements? What kind of change is achievable? Ambiguities indicate how the lifeworld is experienced and defy black-and-white judgements, urging researchers to examine multiple contradictions that are immanent in practices.

In turn, social critique can make ethnographic studies of migration and mobility more generative, cumulative, and communicative. Social critique is generative because it aims at broad insights that go beyond specific cases. Migrants’ experiences with the job market, for example, can be very specific, but to make sense of them we need to relate them to general problems such as institutional discrimination. They develop a critical consciousness through

their experience as migrants, but it is necessarily about society in general rather than about migration per se. It does no justice to migrants if we treat their struggles as data strictly for the narrow field of “migration studies”. Social critique becomes cumulative by providing a number of core problematics as pivots for deep and reflexive analysis, which draw upon a large number of case studies on migration and mobility that are currently scattered and fragmented. Finally, social critique is by definition communicative. It speaks to broad public concerns, and the back-and-forth between researchers and the public, as for example when a researcher’s theorization of migrants’ perceptions triggers discussion among migrants, constitutes an integral part of the research.

The “common concerns” and “infrastructure” approaches

This workshop will build on and contribute to approaches that we are developing at the MPI Department of “Anthropology of Economic Experimentation”.

The “*common concerns*” approach seeks to ground research not in gaps in the academic literature but in the concerns of the communities we study. We aim to theorize migration and mobility by foregrounding the concerns of migrants as they reflect upon their experience. For instance, we study Chinese rural-urban migrants’ feeling of living in “suspension”. They constantly look to move on to better opportunities rather than confronting problems in the here and now. They feel burned out and empty, but they cannot afford to stop. They feel hopeful for, and yet fearful of the future. Our research attributes this felt contradiction to the mass-movement-like market economy that is a mix of socialist legacy (emphasizing inclusiveness) and neoliberal developmentalism (encouraging competition and justifying differentiation). We conceptualize suspension as a structural condition as well as a life strategy that displaces the present. We probe its implications and point out that individuals in suspension become hyper-energetic in their economic activities, but socially and politically passive. They become more susceptible to moralistic discourse and ideological manipulation, which leads to the brutalization of inter-personal relation. Through social media writings and interviews, “suspension” became an emic term used by a broader Chinese public far beyond rural-urban migrants. The public discussion in turn encouraged us to explore the theme of social repair, particularly the bottom-up actions aimed at rebuilding the nearby, as a way to redress the condition of suspension.

While the “common concerns” approach foregrounds subjective feeling, the “*infrastructure*” approach starts with objective conditions, and examines how contradictions and contestations emerge from quotidian operations related to population mobility. The infrastructure approach focuses on how mobility is organized through overlapping sociotechnical systems, such as transport and communication networks and the logistics industry. Such mobility infrastructure has become ever more elaborated in many parts of the world since the 1990s. This not only changes the meaning of mobility (from “moving” to “being moved”) but affects how economic life is organised and how society is governed. Infrastructural elaboration may enable *and* disempower people at the same time. Individuals are enabled because they are better equipped technologically, but they are disempowered because they are dependent on the sociotechnical system and are constantly monitored. As such, mobility infrastructure gives rise to a new type of state power that is based on the capacity of facilitating, as well as restricting, mobility. We call this logistical power. During the COVID pandemic in China, dramatically extended logistical power created a widespread feeling of oppression and absurdity. In sum, by paying close relation to the material and technical processes of how mobility is organised and mediated, the infrastructure approach provides concepts that people can use to make sense of what is happening around them, and to think of its practical implications.

Both of the approaches aim to develop migration-mobility studies as a form of social critique, and both face challenges. For example, we have noticed that the common concerns approach is easy to communicate with various publics but faces the difficulty of collecting systematic data. In contrast, the infrastructure approach is more cumulative but is less effective in generating public debate. At the workshop we want to reflect on these experimentations. What are other approaches that may work better? How should we reflect on two-way etic-emic movements in developing social critique which can make the leap from academia into society and vice versa?

A catalyst for “second projects”

The central task of this workshop is to share participants’ ongoing pursuit of migration-mobility studies as social critique. In doing so we hope to assist early- and mid-career scholars to develop their “second projects”, that is, a major breakthrough after the PhD research, which will have both social resonance and the potential for broader theoretical insights.

Over the first two days, workshop participants will be asked to give a brief account of their past work and then to present ideas for their second project. They are invited to explain why they are moving on to the new research direction, what they aim to achieve intellectually, academically or politically, the possible approaches they might take and the dilemmas they are facing. In the spirit of the Department, projects should be grounded in the concerns of migrants but have the potential to illuminate larger processes of social change. Participants will receive feedback from the group.

On the third day, we will ask participants to suggest ways in which we might use the Mobility Lab (MoLab) inventory as a tool for theoretical development. MoLab, which was initially set up as the Oxford Coronavirus and Mobility Forum (March 2020 -June 2021) to collect real-time observation of the multiple and contradictory impacts of the COVID pandemic on mobility, is an inventory of short case studies that can be used for theorizing across cases and countries. Entering the fourth year of its existence, we hope to develop MoLab into a hub that brings together like-minded researchers to advance migration-mobility studies as social critique.

Participants are requested to submit (1) a one-page account of their doctoral project, or a summary of multiple past projects, (2) a minimum one-page on their idea for a second project, and (3) a list of questions they would like to discuss. In preparing these materials we encourage participants to look at MoLab, and at the Department webpages on the common concerns approach.