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The Case of ‘Mobility’ in American Life

Using Metaphor to Understand History

In the United States, the typical university library holds about two million volumes, and has a computer index that can search by subject or ‘key word’. Type in ‘mobility’, and you’ll get a list of over a thousand titles. There are books about gravity, celestial bodies, and the weather. There are books about migration patterns, dance, blindness, and various forms of motor disability. All such books deal with tangible movement: of the elements, technologies, populations, or individual human beings.1

The word also calls up books that deal with a completely different kind of ‘movement’—an abstract kind that includes topics such as career, education, and success.2 Used this way, ‘mobility’ is a metaphor. It is common to describe the economic and social relationships that help to define capitalist cultures in terms of movement. Movement is so entrenched in how we think about class relationships that using ‘mobility’ to describe them is virtually a reflex. Of course, nothing tangible necessarily ‘moves’ when people are socially or economically ‘mobile’. But there are no


2 Betty Case, ed., Career Planning for Nurses (Albany 1997); Robert Murray Davis, A Lower-Middle-Class Education (Norman, OK 1996); Steven J. Davis, e.a., Job Creation and Destruction (Cambridge, MA 1996).
sub-categories in the classification systems or search engines in computer software that can separate texts by literal meaning on the one hand, and metaphorical meaning on the other. We still need people for that.

Metaphors are integral to how we understand the world. As Susan Sontag has written, ‘Saying a thing is or is like something-it-is-not is a mental operation as old as philosophy and poetry, and the spawning ground of most kinds of understanding’. Through implicit comparison, metaphors signify something other than words’ commonplace definitions. They create a new sense of the things that words stand for, and are a rich source of cultural transmission. Metaphors are made of words and associations that are based in widely-shared lived experience. They suggest a broad consensus among the people who use them, a kind of ‘insiders’ lexicon, and they reinforce the implicit understanding on which their effectiveness depends.3

The word ‘implicit’ is crucial to exploring how metaphors can help us to understand history. When comparisons and analogies are made directly, as in the case of similes, the grammar of the sentence does some of the work that makes the comparison effective; for example, ‘My love is like a red rose’. But when such comparisons happen in metaphors, meaning is made indirectly. For example, in the United States, everyone knows what it means to say ‘I’m on fire’, or ‘Your voice is music to my ears’, or ‘Your mind is a steel trap’, or ‘That’s crap’. Dutch metaphors like ‘He is a rock in the surf’, or ‘He is the bunny’ would fall on deaf ears in the States. No one in particular decided that the analogies in these metaphors ‘work’. They reflect culture-wide habits of thought, based on reference to specific things - fire, music, a steel trap, crap, rocks, surf, and bunnies - without stemming from any intention on the part of any particular person. Such metaphors become commonplace over time, as people use them to communicate with one another in a common cultural context.

How, then, can metaphor help us to understand history? History is usually told through narrative, and until fairly recently, the narrative form was widely assumed to be an extension of historical experience itself. Late twentieth century philosophers raised questions about that assumption, suggesting that other structures of historical understanding might be

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possible. Metaphor is not characterized by sequential properties, as narrative is, but rather by implicit tensions between the elements in the analogies. Tensions such as these are also characteristic of dialectical relationships. Considering the centrality of dialectics to historical understanding, especially in the German philosophical tradition, metaphor offers particularly ripe possibilities for unique historical insight. Since narrative has been a source of philosophical debate it is fruitful to ask if metaphor—another structure of telling, or more properly, of showing—can inspire other kinds of historical interpretation. ‘Mobility’ is my case study.

‘Mobility’ is a difficult metaphor to unpack for two reasons. First, it is structurally compatible with narrative, in that the concept of movement can possess something of a sequential, if not always linear, quality. To interpret the metaphor of mobility historically is to run counter to the agenda, if you will, of the metaphor itself.

A second challenge that ‘mobility’ imposes is its centrality to American identity more generally. The concept is one of the guiding themes in U.S. history. Movement itself, in any form, is often the story. From Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, to Bernard Bailyn’s claims about the ‘peopling’ of British North America, to James Jasper’s recent book *Restless Nation*, Americans are portrayed, in Ray Ginger’s words, as ‘people on the move’. Obviously, many students of American life have questioned such boosterism. But the notion of movement permeates studies of the United States even when it is used to criticize the nation’s failures.

These interpretive difficulties can be addressed by returning to the conventional literary features of metaphor and abstracting from them in order to develop a viable methodology. Although metaphors become reflexive over time, they often begin by referring to specific things in space and time. To what specific things did the metaphor of mobility originally refer, and when and where did it happen? Are there instructive tensions between the elements in the analogy on which it is based?

There is, in fact, a story behind the metaphor of ‘mobility’. It begins in the sphere of strictly physical movement. Movement, energy, and change as the keys to the nature of reality itself, have been of vital interest to philosophers since before Aristotle. Physicists worked in Aristotle’s shadow until the sixteenth century. Copernicus, Galileo, and especially Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century, transformed how movement was understood. Newton’s laws of motion were universal, and showed unity in the physical world. Since the revolution in scientific thinking was largely
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due to theories about movement, in intellectual circles the always high status of movement increased even more.  

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, Enlightenment thinkers applied Newton’s ideas to the social world. Political theorists were thrilled by its implications. John Locke admired Newton, was his pen-pal for nearly 20 years, and thought that universal natural laws applied even to human affairs. In a context governed by such laws, human life could be observed, mapped, experimented upon, and shaped.  

Both Newtonian physics and Lockean liberalism were crucial to the capacity of ‘mobility’ to function with ‘implicit’ meaning. But theories alone would not have sufficed without specific human actions from which it could be drawn and used as a metaphor. Concurrent with Locke’s and Newton’s insights, the authority of the British crown was compromised by the expansion of Parliament and the extension of rights to the people. One of the most dramatic expressions of these developments was the politically-inspired collective physical movement of common people. People took to the streets, using public space to advocate for their own interests.  

The history of the English language ‘bears witness’ to how observers used Newtonian ideas to describe these popular upheavals. According to the British historian Max Beloff, ‘[I]t was at this time that the word “mobile”, or its contraction “mob”, came into general use to describe a disorderly gathering or even, in London at least, the lower class as a whole’. Observers used ‘mobility’ and ‘mobile’ as interchangeable concrete nouns to refer to people who embodied threatening powers. The Oxford English Dictionary


Mobility offers many examples. 'Mobility' expressed a tension between the sheer fact of physical movement and its cultural meaning at the dawn of the liberal state.7

The leaders of pre-Revolutionary America also drew analogies from physics, and specifically from Newton, as they worked to develop a republican government. They granted that spontaneous public gatherings had an important place in political life; for example, Jefferson believed that 'crowds had a legitimate political role to play.8 But the meanings and purposes of crowd activity changed after the Revolution.9 Leaders no longer met such gatherings with ambivalence, but with disapproval and fear, explaining mobs now as an indication of the undesirable and dangerous conformity that democracy could incite.

Early in the nineteenth century, the metaphor of 'mobility' continued to be used to refer to ordinary persons, but its referent underwent a vital change. It is hard to say precisely how and where the transition happened first, because it occurred simultaneously in intellectual circles and popular culture. The word was no longer a concrete noun, but an abstract one. It still referred to the so-called 'movement' of ordinary persons, but for the first time, it described individuals. And it connoted not physical actions of bodies, but social and economic relationships in a robust market culture. It was adopted by novelists, intellectual leaders, and reformers as a common


9 Paul A. Gilje, The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834 (Chapel Hill, NC 1987) 100.
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-and always recognizable- way to refer to social and economic inequality.\(^{10}\)

The first self-proclaimed social 'scientists' adopted the language of physics. In 1822, the French philosopher August Comte wrote that the social world was governed by 'a great fundamental law'. He sought what he called a 'social physics' that would investigate 'the laws of action and reaction of the different parts of the social system - apart... from the fundamental movement which is always gradually modifying them'. Discovering the 'natural' laws of society would yield positive - as in *positivist* - scientific knowledge.\(^{11}\)

Sociologists were among the first university-trained students of the human condition to gain professional legitimacy by adopting scientific methodologies. Ever since they took up residence in American universities in the 1890s, their discipline has used movement as a guiding category.\(^{12}\)

Among American historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, Richard Hofstadter and his ken, revisionists, and new social historians all have relied on the metaphor. In the introductions and first chapters of the most celebrated books in American history and American studies - both new works and classics - physical movement and metaphorical 'mobility' are everywhere, and they are everywhere *together*. In the twentieth century, players on all sides of debates about social class have depended on spatial metaphors in order to argue with one another. It has been the common vocabulary among people who disagree.

In 1964, Harvard historian Stephan Thernstrom called the metaphor into question. In his landmark study, *Poverty and Progress*, Thernstrom suggested that movement and 'mobility' ought not be grappled with

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separately, but rather in light of one another. Yet most of the book's influence has not been its argument, but its method: the community study. Poverty and Progress has been called the inaugural moment of the 'new' urban history and the 'new social history'. Twenty years after its publication, historians were assessing its influence in that light, and it is still required reading in American history graduate programs. Yet the content of Thernstrom's insights, about the concurrence of physical movement and the representation of class through movement in everyday thought, remain implicit in a great deal of scholarship on U. S. culture, just as metaphors function with implicit meaning. Both 'movement' and 'mobility' are often the broad framework for understanding what used to be called 'the American experience'. Scholars often refer explicitly to Thernstrom, sometimes along with George Rogers Taylor's classic work, The Transportation Revolution, to provide a context for whatever is being called the 'real' story of power relationships in the United States. To break open 'mobility' is to subject the context, too, to critical scrutiny.

'Mobility' has shaped the language of social inequality among social scientists and historians, and subsequently the colloquial habits of Americans more generally. Likewise, the experience of physical movement had shaped the tangible, visceral realm of human experience. It is a truism that physical movement is central to American culture. But movement is not simply a matter of mechanics -of going from point A to point B. Movement, and particularly individual movement, is bound to social

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identity by historical and nation-defining tensions. The railroad has received immense critical attention as a cultural icon of nineteenth century America in literature, in the canons of our discipline, and in the historiography of the United States in general. But physical movement was experienced by most people who did it, importantly and increasingly, as an individual matter for particular purposes in the context of particular lives.

A brief consideration of some concrete examples illustrates the point. Early in the nineteenth century, the metaphor of mobility shifted from crowd to individual. Movement is easier when the innate powers of the human body are extended by technologies. Examining just who had access to such technologies can tell us something about the tensions between movement and 'mobility' that have continued far beyond seventeenth century England. Technologies, forms, causes, and effects of moving about have been in a constant state of revision in American life. Shoes, horses, bicycles, and automobiles—the primary technologies of individual movement—are commodities that have not been equally available to all people, nor have they circulated through our culture without inciting comment. They are also not grouped together by the intellectual practices that bring order to knowledge. Conventions of classification, and not of living, often have determined whether a given commodity is considered by historians as a bona fide form of 'technology,' and so whether it belongs under the rubric 'transportation,' or ought to have a humbler designation. This is no way to understand how people are oriented to the things through which they live.16

Shoes, horses, bicycles and automobiles have abetted the way Americans enact freedom - one at a time, motivated by their own will - and they have helped to create many assumptions about what freedom, opportunity, and 'mobility' are. Perhaps the most neglected technology of individual movement is the humble shoe, which was and still is the most ubiquitous tool that augments human movement.

Compare shoes and horses for a moment. Before the ubiquitous automobile, people who had access to horses always had a measure of social power that was different in kind from people who didn’t. Social identity often determined how and whether one could move about with powers beyond his own muscles, or without raising suspicion. Horse power wasn’t scarce to the wealthy, who didn’t need to conserve it for farming. They could have some horses whose sole purpose was travel. They could also

choose to walk at certain times, in certain places, and for purposes that were not tied to survival, such as 'promenading' in fashionable public parks and streets. Such people enjoyed the right and ability to move about unfettered. In contrast, some American inhabitants - slaves, indentured servants, transients and vagrants, lone women, and indeed, persons without simple access to a pair of serviceable shoes - have enjoyed neither the right to travel freely, nor easy access to technologies of movement. For them, certain dimensions of freedom were curtailed, and especially freedom to have access to the kinds of opportunities that only movement can create - opportunities associated with social and economic 'mobility'. Movement and identity are intertwined, and identity could be either an asset or an impediment to 'mobility'.

A common assumption about individual freedom in the United States is that national conditions of equal opportunity allow individuals to shape their own destinies, and to 'rise above' the circumstances of their birth. The borders of identity are said to be unstable and permeable, making for a context within which, at least theoretically, citizens may realize their 'highest' potential. Like individual physical movement, social and economic 'mobility' are often conceived of as technical problems of style and adaptation, often, to middle class culture. Anyone, allegedly, can do it.

Another assumption is that an individual's inability to 'rise' is her or his own fault, a moral failing or character flaw, rather than, perhaps, a built-in feature of the political economy of the United States. Again, the metaphor of mobility, drawn from physics, helps to perpetuate assumptions like these. The linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that orientational metaphors can organize 'a whole system of concepts with respect to one another'. 'Mobility' has come to organize ideas about economic and social inequality. Hence, it tacitly suggests reasons why one might move up or down on the socio-economic hierarchy: because of luck or misfortune, virtue or vice, enthusiasm or apathy, good or bad taste - in short, not because of the relations of power to which 'mobility' implicitly refers. The very foundations of this ethical system hide its oppressive nature.

I realize that the link that I'm describing between 'mobility' and morality is difficult to recognize. Our use of the metaphor is virtually automatic,

18 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago 1994) 14.
and it is hard to imagine how to refer to American inequalities without it. The assumptions on which it is based are largely camouflaged by the individualistic ideology for which it stands. This is not only an interpretive challenge; it is endemic of an ethical crisis. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has written, since Kant grappled with the problem of moral surety in the age of scientific revolution, the moral vocabulary of the Western world has been bankrupt. The metaphor of mobility was in fact spawned by the ethical crisis that Kant sought to address. One of its main features is that it is anti-materialist and idealistic: the idea of 'upward' mobility depends on the notion that individual qualities of character can transcend circumstances bequeathed by history. Hence, the metaphor has created conceptual distance from the unequal material conditions - the culture of physical movement - that gave rise to it and that keep it alive.

Physical movement has always been intimately tied to social and economic fortune. In the nineteenth century, 'mobility' began its long reign as one of the ideological hallmarks of the nation's identity. The notion that physical movement is intimately and crucially tied to individual social and economic power - and freedom - suggests a re-thinking of the widespread belief that social and economic 'mobility' is a central feature of American democracy. Yet it can be no more democratic, in any historical moment, than are the technologies from which its power as a metaphor is drawn.