

Conference Report

Old City, New Lives: Mobility, Place Identity and Transnational Communities



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Some of the articles that are contained within this volume are developments from conference papers presented at the University of Girona (Universitat de Girona) in 2018. This conference, held in the Faculty of Tourism (Facultat de Tourisme), was an apt location for a conference on contemporary mobilities, transnationality, and place identity. Girona, a town in the Catalonia region of North-eastern Spain, was (and still is) a politically charged space. One could feel the general tensions created by the 2017 independence referendum walking around Girona and Barcelona. Also, in the historic quarter of Girona (the “Barri Vell”), anti-tourism flags could be seen hung from resident balconies. And of course, on the day of the conference, researchers were gathering to discuss contemporary mobilities and their contemporary geographical, sociological and political dynamics.

Tasleem Shakur’s opening “exploratory” introduction contextualized the ensuing discussions within the historiography of transnational mobility. Shakur emphasised the significance of trade, the historical legacy of the silk road, and the dominance of sea travel. As readers of Fernand Braudel’s (1992) expansive historiography of commerce attests to, capitalism evolved out of both modern finance and the ‘time-space compressions’ (Harvey, 1989) produced by naval transportation. Shakur discusses this under the shift from pre to capitalist (and perhaps even ‘post’ capitalist?) forms of mobilization and travel. Rightfully so, Shakur linked this historiography of trade and mobility to the history of colonial power, the extraction of resources from the ‘developing’ or ‘third’ world. Shakur bluntly (and aptly) referred to this as ‘colonial

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plunder'. Shakur also discussed the contemporary global division of labour and its impact on mobilities, *vis-à-vis* migration. At times, Shakur would refer to this as 'plough in India, factories in England' (or some other variation of this anecdote). This led to an engaged discussion of multiculturalism, westernization, contemporary (and historic) refugee crises and ethnic cleansings (focusing on the contemporary Rohingya experience). Shakur's exploration emphasised (for me) two key aspects. Firstly, we (as researchers) must be critical towards mobilities, not forgetting *how* our current spatial configurations and practices came about. Secondly, that transnational mobility and *hybrid* identities are not new: they can be traced back to the emergence of trade and the silk road.

Following from this exploratory introduction, Beata Labhun discussed her case study of migrants in the Italian city of Rome. Specifically, she focused on the lives of refugees living in a religious Covent. Labhun traced the history of the Covent of her case study, emphasising their role in helping Jews during the Second World War. This led into a discussion of the politics (or polities) of visibility and invisibility. Labhun also discussed how the project she studied was a charity project. That is, taking care of the refugees is *not* a state project.

As such, practices of community integration—making the refugees feel like they belong in Rome—in the Covent are active in orientation. Also, Labhun emphasised the 'scales of transformation' or integration. Her example could be described as a 'micro-scale' project that connects to a pre-existing history of care. Labhun sketched the process of becoming-integrated as a movement from: (i) emergency (the precarity of the refugees); (ii) to Convents; (iii) to normality. Interestingly, Labhun discussed how this process is not *totally* democratic: there is a 'selection process', there are interviews, contracts, and so on. Charity in this case is conditional: the success rate of one entering the Covent program is 80%.

The relationship between religious organizations, the state and private investors is an interesting one, especially when there are real life implications for contemporary refugees. Such research is not simply academic: it is also *political*. In contrast to this presentation, Frances Fuste-Forne's presentation focused on urban food tourism in Catalonia. While Labhun's presentation connected to Shakur's introduction via its discussion of contemporary refugees, Forne's presentation is (indirectly and

unintentionally) connected to Shakur's introduction via its connection to trade and consumption.

Forne importantly highlighted how food moves like people do. The mobilities of things is as important as the movement of people. Forne emphasises that the food market and food purchasing is a daily practice. Engaging with localized food markets could be described as an 'immersion' into a localized 'way of life' within a cultural landscape of consumption and trade. Here, Forne raises the issue of authenticity: does the touristic engagement with such markets (and the adaptation of markets to suit the 'needs' of the tourist) compromise this cultural landscape? The local development of experiences and taste is significant, and for Forne is indicative of cultural and social differentiation.

Artisanal markets utilizing and promoting local produce does in part negate the transnational food trade. But, as Shakur emphasised in his introduction, westernization is a fact: the shopping mall, the supermarket, McDonalds *and* artisanal markets all co-exist within the same economic ecology. Of course, critiquing ethically negative products and emphasising local produce can be a critical act, as Timothy Morton's discussion of colonial 'blood sugar' (1998) and Stuart Hall's discussion of "British tea" demonstrate (1997). In short, food consumption practices do not exist within an ahistorical vacuum.

Of course, reaching a market usually requires some form of transportation. Laura Plana *et al's* paper focused on sustainable transport geographies in Girona. Plana focused her presentation on the shift from 'urban density' in compact cities to a 'density of flows', that is, an increased intensification of traffic (if not congestion specifically). This shift in densities arguably transforms the relation between individuated territorial units (towns, cities, villages, etc.). Plana argued that these 'networks of flows' effect public spaces.

Plana also discussed the connections between economic crises and the regional planning system. The delaying of certain developmental projects produced empty and underdeveloped spaces. Some of these projects were related to the development of public transport systems. Lana proposes that there could be more architectural intervention here, designing greenspaces and afford networks of sustainable ecological spaces. However, there is a problem here. How can ecological and sustainable planning

intervene if such projects could be delayed by economic factors? This dilemma problematises the capacities for sustainable development that scholars and critics must challenge and develop further.

Lina Enderica Izquierdo's paper on resident perceptions of tourists in the Barri Vell focuses on that 'political feeling' the author outlined in the introductory paragraphs of this report. Izquierdo discusses the intensification of change that has occurred to public spaces, citing the shifting uses of space as an important factor that shifts place perceptions. While she notes that there are myriad "touristic" spaces in the Barri Vell, tourists are not the only people who inhabit and use this space. Izquierdo indicated that different perceptions of tourists and the differentiated perceptions of place highlight that the Barri Vell is a 'contested space' (to deploy a term Shakur often uses).

The common resident perception is that the city (the Barri Vell) belongs to the residents and *not* the tourists. The nature of this 'belonging' is awkward. Does it derive from a Catalan nationalism (or regionalism?) Does it derive from owning property, rather than renting apartments (via platforms like Airbnb?) Or does it simply derive from a shared cultural milieu, sharing a common language, and cultural practices? What Izquierdo terms 'tourismphobia' could be interpreted as a reactionary attitude, or it could be interpreted as a legitimate response to the transnational capitalization of the neighbourhood. What is clear is that 'tourismphobia' is a serious political orientation that has real world effects on the perceptions of place.

Izquierdo finally discusses the influence of tourists in the social and cultural spheres. She notes that tourists are perceived to effect the relations between neighbours, going as far as to posit that tourists introduce new 'antagonisms' into the local population. The concept of hybridity in Girona is interpreted as a possible antagonism. Interestingly, the next paper by Magda Sibley also focuses on hybridity, but the hybridity of colonial architecture and interior design in the ex-French colony of Morocco.

Sibley refers to the fusion between colonial and vernacular design and style as a form of 'hybrid heritage'. The heritage tourist seeks out such hybrid heritage. Sibley claimed that the growth in Moroccan heritage tourism has been steady and systematic. Through this process, urban heritage and its cultural value becomes 'prey' for heritage tourists.

During the colonial period, some urban areas were destroyed for construction space. However, the French colonials did *not* do it in cities like Marrakesh, affording the development of a heritage tourism industry in the city.

In discussing the history of Medina's class dynamics and its urban and rural geography, Sibley highlights that migrant movement (from the urban to the rural and vice versa) has the capacity to change and transform the social fabric and composition of the city. In contemporary Medina, the cities composition is 'hybrid' in composition: local residents mix with post-modern Europeans who purchase 'historical' properties in Medina. However, this hybridity typically leads to increasing house prices. In this process, Sibley claims that local Moroccan residents are pushed out of these old historical cities, making way for a new market of post-modern Europeans. Here, Sibley highlights a multitude of paradoxes and contradictions concerning this hybridized urban space.

Among them, there is a differentiation in cultural values and practices within the post-colonial city. One is unsure whether the situation is exactly post-colonial or if it is neo-colonial, or something different altogether. Also, market-led reconstructions and restorations reduce the authentic nature of the heritage sites. Sibley's conclusion poses the question of how to engage with heritage as a form of economic development with compromising and undermining non-economic cultural values. This is an important issue for scholars and researchers to engage with.

The final presentation by Konstantina Zerva discussed the co-existence of hybridity, through analysing the co-existence of local, immigrant and tourist identities. Her presentation focused on the contested nature of heterogeneous communities. This discussion, interestingly, ignited a rather personal and impassioned response from the audience. Zerva's discussion 'hit a nerve' (as they colloquially say) in several audience members. Specifically, I recall Beata Labhun's responses, focusing on her contested and negotiated identity as a migrant. Tasleem Shakur also had much to say on this topic, as a Bangladeshi migrant (migrant may not even be the right term at this point). As a relatively boring British citizen (born and raised in the North of England within a nuclear working-class family), I could not contribute much to this discussion.

This discussion and the conference presentations discussed in this report attest to the contested and hybrid natures of our personal identities and our impersonal spaces. It seems apt to me to use the term ‘weird identity’ to refer to ‘selfhood’ at this point. Our unconscious self-deceptions about our notions of ‘selfhood’ and our authentic engagements with various ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 2006) and unimagined geographical realities, is a hallmark of the ‘weird’. We live and exist in a real world with real economic, political, cultural and social dynamics. How we engage with this reality, how old cities shape new (and weird?) identities, is something that researchers and scholars should investigate further. We should neither forget history, nor should we forget the weirdness that stems from attempting to negotiate our contested identities within an odd transnational world.

References

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Conference photos

