

Chapter 5

Connecting to the future: the role of spatial mobilities in young people's imagined biographies

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INTRODUCTION

Arjun Appadurai defines the capacity to aspire “as the ability to read a map of a journey into the future” (2004: 76). Mobility is a key component in the construction of such a journey for young people today – both in public discourse (as a goal to be reached in the field of European youth policies for instance) and as an element for opening up new areas of opportunity and change in individuals’ life and career paths.

According to the “capabilities approach” (Sen 1980) and Appadurai’s further developments of it (2004), we argue that it is important to consider mobility not only as an actual behaviour but also as bringing with it a whole set of cultural elements making mobility possible in people’s lives. In the distinction made by Sen between capability and functioning, the latter indicates an achievement or outcome, while the former is the capacity to achieve such functioning. A capability can be defined as an opportunity or the freedom to act on one’s choices. Therefore, well-being should be assessed not so much by what people are or what people do, as by what they are free to be or do; for example, being healthy, being able to read and write, knowing how to participate in the life of the community as well as being able to see how mobility can determine their future. In order to place young people’s aspirations of mobility in this perspective, we draw on the concept of “motility” (Kaufmann 2002, Kaufmann, Viry and Widmer 2010).

In order to give an example of the usefulness of this perspective, in this article we address the role of mobility in the imagined future of today's youth. Our study (part of a larger research project on youth)¹⁶ draws on the analysis of 340 essays written by 18 and 19-year-old students from the largest town in Sardinia.¹⁷ They were asked to imagine being 90 years of age and telling the story of their lives. As we shall see, what emerged from their imagined biographies is how mobility seems to be a significant factor in young people's aspirations. Nevertheless, their view of future mobility tells us a much more ambivalent story about mobility per se, as a concrete possibility in young people's lives.

We believe that a measured interpretation of such ambivalence goes well beyond the single and limited case we are dealing with here, and should serve as a meaningful example to identify the cultural obstacles (in terms of socially constructed knowledge, skills and value attitudes) that restrain young people's access to mobility today. In short, it relates directly to one of the main objectives of European youth policies.

MOBILITY IN YOUTH POLICIES: A BRIEF ACCOUNT

Since the end of the 1980s, when the European Union started to promote youth exchanges through specific funding programmes such as "Erasmus" and "Youth for Europe",¹⁸ youth mobility has been a permanent fixture on the European Union's agenda. During the 1990s, a series of resolutions adopted by the Council of Europe dealt with promoting the geographical mobility of young people (European Youth Card Association). In this phase, youth mobility gradually came to be seen as an asset in European youth policy, culminating in 2001 with the European Commission's White Paper "New impetus for European youth". The main purpose of this White Paper was to propose a new framework for co-operation among the various people involved in the area of youth policy in order to better involve young people in decisions that concern them. It was also intended as a response to young people's strong disaffection with the traditional forms of participation in public life and, in order to facilitate European countries in taking action to help young people in Europe, the White Paper proposed a new framework for co-operation between EU countries. In 2006, the European Quality Charter for Mobility established the quality reference document for education and training stays abroad: it was addressed to all member states and aimed to provide guidance on mobility agreements on learning or for other purposes, such as professional development, for both young and adult participants. Subsequently, the Youth in Action programme (2007-2013) has stressed the importance of involving young people in society as active citizens

16. For more information about the research project see: <http://people.unica.it/ifuture/>.

17. Sardinia is one of the Italian regions traditionally deprived in terms of economic and educational opportunities: youth unemployment in 2012 was 47.3% (compared to 35.3% for the whole of Italy, and well above the EU average of 22.8%). Youth disadvantage is consistent also in terms of educational achievements. For instance Tertiary educational attainment for the age group 30-34 is 17.6% in Sardinia, 21.7% in Italy while the EU average is 35.8%.

18. For a complete report on the history of European youth policies see Elisa Briga, "Youth Mobility" in *Youth knowledge*, No. 15, EKCYIP insights, Philip Boetzelen (ed.), Council of Europe and the European Commission, 2012.

in order to strengthen their sense of belonging to Europe. In 2008, the “Conclusions of the Council” on youth mobility highlighted the fact that the mobility of young people is essential to promoting a sense of belonging to Europe, enhancing social and work-related integration, and ensuring a competitive European economy. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe agree on the fact that youth mobility is a priority issue in the field of youth policy and collaborate to enhance it. Indeed, one of the main initiatives of the Agenda/Europe 2020 is the Commission’s “Youth on the Move”, whose priorities include improving the geographical mobility of young people throughout Europe.

According to the European programmes and documents on youth policies, being mobile is a skill that young people have to learn if they are to improve the general conditions of their lives and aspire to a better future for themselves and for Europe as a whole. Mobility is in fact viewed as a “key instrument to prepare young people to live in the society of the future, be open to new ideas and deal with the unfamiliar, and it aims to extend opportunities for learning mobility to all young people in Europe by 2020, by mobilizing resources and removing obstacles to pursuing a learning experience abroad” (Briga 2012: 77).

European policies on youth mobility stress the idea of young people as crucial actors “invested with the responsibility of determining the future directions of our societies” (Eriksson 2012: 22). However, if compared with EU policy objectives, data on mobility reveal a slightly different picture. Long-term trends do indicate that young people in Europe have become increasingly mobile inasmuch as they now increasingly cross national borders to study, work in paid employment or the voluntary sector, or travel for pleasure. However, after 2008, the current economic crisis has produced a levelling out or an actual decrease in youth mobility in many countries. According to the EU Youth Report 2012, statistics on mobility today show that only a limited number of young people have experienced a period abroad (more than one month) in order to work.¹⁹ On the whole, the vast majority of young people reported that they have never ventured abroad for learning or training purposes. Indeed, only 13.5% of them have ever studied in another country.

Even though one of the main purposes stated in EU policies is to remove obstacles to youth mobility, the results are not as promising as might be expected. In addition, the objective of including disadvantaged categories has by no means been reached. Resistance seems to be particularly high among young Italians, at least according to official EU data.

If we look at data on mobility reported in the EU Youth Report 2012, only 12% of young Italian adults said they had spent a period abroad – or were staying abroad at the time of the survey – for education purposes. Unlike average figures for the EU (somewhat higher for learning mobility periods abroad) the figure for sojourns abroad for at least one month for reasons other than for education/training or vacation/tourism was notably low (with an average of 12% Italy is the second lowest among the European countries).

19. See EU Youth Report 2012, p. 35. Data presented are the results/findings of the Eurobarometer survey “Youth on the Move” 2011.

Moreover, the length of sojourns is generally brief, given that the proportion of young Italian adults with a higher education qualification who had stayed abroad for at least three months for education or training purposes is one of the lowest in Europe. Italy is thus one of the countries where it is least likely that European students will decide to study within the framework of an EU-funded mobility programme. Unsurprisingly, the majority of young adults in Italy (55%) said they were not willing – or have little desire – to work in another European country (Italy is the second most “unwilling” country among the EU).

Any in-depth analysis of the Italian case requires greater scrutiny. On the one hand, it seems that the lack of youth policies at the national level weakens the efficacy of the European ones; on the other hand, young people seem unable to exploit the opportunities that EU programmes offer them. Although the reasons underlying such resistance are not fully understood, it is worth noting that according to the Eurobarometer survey 2011, the lack of financial means or the cost of a stay being too expensive are not the prime reasons why respondents did not go abroad (20%); the main reason is a lack of interest (28%).

MOBILITIES AND MOTILITIES

As we have seen, mobility is an essential component in EU policies, yet it is also a multifaceted concept that is worth analysing in order to better understand. Not only should we examine different forms of mobility (holiday, learning, work and voluntary work, short and long-term, physical and virtual), but also probe the diverse meanings of mobility and the way these are reflected in both public discourse and personal narratives. For instance, close examination of the core content of the EU discourse on youth and mobility reveals that there are at least three separate meanings ascribed to the term.

First, mobility is portrayed as freedom of movement. In this sense mobility is a right, as clearly expressed in the Green Paper promoting the learning mobility of young people: “The right to be mobile across national borders is one of the fundamental freedoms which the EU bestows on its citizens” (European Commission 2008a).

Furthermore, as stated in the White Paper “European transport policy for 2010”, “personal mobility, which increased from 17 km a day in 1970 to 35 km in 1998, is now more or less seen as an acquired right” (European Commission 2001: 11).

The link between mobility, freedom and rights has long been recognised and is now well established (Sager T. 2006: 467). In this meaning, mobility expresses the idea that forms the basis of the creation of a European economic, political and social space; it should be remembered that the core of European Union economic and social policy can be encapsulated under the idea of the “five freedoms” – free movement of goods, capital, services, persons and knowledge.

At the same time, mobility is present in policy narratives as an experience needed to improve both the opportunities and outlook of EU citizens. Experiencing mobility is considered to be a key instrument in building European citizenship.

Learning mobility, i.e. transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills, is one of the fundamental ways in which individuals, particularly young

people, can strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development. Studies confirm that learning mobility adds to human capital, as students access new knowledge and develop new linguistic skills and intercultural competences.

– Commission’s Green Paper on learning mobility for young people 2008: 2

Exploiting the opportunities that mobility provides is seen as an essential contribution to many EU policy objectives and there is a growing amount of literature that endeavours to discuss and assess the effect that experiencing mobility has on personal development (boosting people’s skills and employability) as well as on building a sense of EU citizenship and helping to form young people as future leaders and citizens with a greater respect for diversity (King and Raghuram 2013, Kuhn 2012, Sigalas 2010).

A third dimension, which is particularly relevant in the case of youth policies, is mobility as an ability in itself. According to Olsson et al. (2011) mobility as an ability is pivotal in defining young people’s privileged positions in the European project. “Mobility is thus identified as the ability to lift him or herself over and above provincial and local contexts” (Olsson U. et al. 2011). To be mobile is one of the attributes characterising the “ideal” European citizenship, and “in these goals the floating signifier ‘youth’ is coded as being or becoming an active border crosser, participatory, full of initiative, enterprising, creative, feeling solidarity, and as being boundlessly equipped with an understanding of the cultural diversity and the common values assumed to existing Europe” (Olsson U. et al. 2011).

Looking at the complexity of meanings of mobility leads us to emphasise that mobility cannot be seen as an identifiable and clear-cut behaviour (to be mobile or not). In a cultural perspective, mobility has to be seen as a form of embodied cultural capital (Holdsworth 2006) expressing values, aspirations and life goals and requiring practical and cognitive resources.

Recently, within the field of mobility studies, the concept of motility has been developed to deal precisely with this dimension of mobility (mobility as potential movement).²⁰

Motility can be defined as “how an individual or group takes possession of the realm of possibilities for mobility and builds on it to develop personal projects” (Flamm and Kaufmann 2006: 168). Three interdependent factors determine a person’s motility and define what has been called “motility capital”: access, competence and skills, and cognitive appropriation. Access refers to the ease with which individuals can take advantage of mobility (in line with a growing use of the term “access” that transcends its original spatial connotations, referring to public access to resources and opportunities); competence refers to mobility skills and abilities required (physical ability), acquired skills (e.g. driving licence) and organisational skills (e.g. synchronising activities and planning); and cognitive appropriation refers to the ways in which mobility agents evaluate mobility options and is concerned with strategies, values, representations and habits. The concept of motility is distinct from mobility

20. The extension of the biological notion of motility to the potential mobility of humans was proposed by Kaufmann (2002). For a recent review of the concept see Kellerman (2012).

practices, since these last ones represent the achievement of the ability to choose mobility. In this sense mobility has seen as an opportunity.

Reassessing the EU's commitment to increasing mobility, we can say that if it is necessary to remove obstacles to mobility as behaviour (accessibility), more attention should perhaps be paid to the more complex set of cultural elements that enable young people in the EU to see mobility as a possibility. In this direction, more specific questions need to be addressed, such as: what kind of knowledge and organisational capacity is needed? What kinds of strategies of mobility are used? What kind of values, representations and habits affect mobility?

INSIGHTS FROM A CASE STUDY: YOUNG PEOPLE'S NARRATIVES OF IMAGINED MOBILITIES

In order to address these questions, we will now discuss the findings of research²¹ into young people and the future. Looking at the way mobility is envisaged in imagined biographies helps us to look into motility and the set of cultural elements shaping it. According to some literature that explores young people's temporalities and the way they plan/view their future in a context of increasing uncertainty (Leccardi 2009; Melucci 1996) the main focus is to explore the intersection/interconnection between the ability itself to plan and ideas concerning the future. This relation between planning the future and its representations is often critical and can generate varying outcomes: one of these is the process of "presentification", which refers to the tendency for an ability to build a future project to be replaced by a constant adaptation to the present in order to promptly turn chances into opportunities. Focusing on Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" (2004) our research project has tried to conceptualise young people's efforts at imagining their future in terms of their ability to "realistically" project their present opportunities while being able to employ socially relevant narratives to frame it.

From a methodological point of view, the research project draws on an already established research procedure (Elliott 2010; Lyon and Crow 2012; Lyon, Morgan and Crow, 2012) and focuses on the analysis – both qualitative and quantitative – of approximately 250 essays written by 18 and 19-year-old students in the largest town in Sardinia (Cagliari). The students were asked to imagine they were 90 and to tell the story of their lives. Essays were collected during autumn 2012 in five high schools in Cagliari, from the fourth-year high school students.²² The choice of schools involved was designed to obtain a heterogeneous, representative sample of students from different social classes, living in both urban and peripheral areas.

From a sociological point of view, using biographical narratives is a useful way to explore and understand people's experiences and how much importance they ascribe to the events in their lives (Demazière and Dubar 2000; Jedlowski 2000; Maines, Pierce and Laslett 2008). In the case of these students' essays on imagined biographies, what emerges is the higher or lower ability in projecting and constructing "possible futures".

21. For further information see: <http://people.unica.it/ifuture/>.

22. In Italy high school lasts five years, from 14/15 to 18/19 years old. The first two years are compulsory.

According to Michael Bamberg, “When narrators tell a story, they give ‘narrative form’ to experience. They position characters in space and time and, in a very broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened – or what is imagined to have happened”.²³ In the same way, students who participate in the “iFuture” research project reorganise their life experiences in order to recount an imagined future: while they are imagining they are 90 and writing the story of their life, they are collecting all the “images” and knowledge of the world they have in order to give a sense to their imagined biography. From the analysis of the essays, one striking element is that geographical mobility is an important part of young people’s imagined biography. Almost 60% of the students include mobility in their future life.

The three main motivations for students moving abroad were for holidays, to study and to find work. We shall look briefly at the first two types of mobility but then focus on work since it better indicates students’ ability to imagine and organise a project in the future.

The theme of holidays is present in almost all the essays and in different moments of life. A common feature of this type of mobility is that it is always described as a dream journey, often shared with friends, boy/girlfriends or family:

I decided to travel, a long trip in order to admire all the wonderful European cities!

– Student, female

I allow myself a beautiful holiday in Paris with my boyfriend.

– Student, female

Another often repeated preoccupation among students is the fact they have to improve their English-speaking skills in order to find a job, either in Italy or in a foreign country. Yet, despite perfectly rational accounts of wanting to “go abroad in order to improve my English”, there are few examples of concrete projects to improve mobility. On the contrary, their stays abroad are described as isolated episodes, something that often has nothing to do with the rest of their life experiences:

That summer was one of the best of my life: I decided to go to London with the young and gutsy aunt Asja. I was more interested in improving my English, she in her passion for Great Britain [...] After our stay in London we decided to come back to Cagliari (in Sardinia). In October I went to Genoa with my friends to sit an exam in order to enter the Naval Academy.

– Student, female

Next to this snapshot form of mobility, which characterised students’ imagined biographies,²⁴ mobility is perceived as part of a life experience entailing a decision

23. Bamberg M. (2012), “Narrative Analysis”, in H. Cooper (Editor-in-chief), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (3 volumes), APA Press, Washington, DC, p. 77.

24. A common feature of students’ essays has to do with the narrative structure: almost all of the 250 essays show a fragmented narration that seems to reveal a writing attitude typical of social media, for example Twitter or Facebook. Students are used to writing and reading short pieces of information that refer to the moment they write. In this way it seems they have lost the sense of past, present and future as a historical continuum.

to migrate that will hopefully lead to the achievement of professional and personal ambitions. While students seem to be aware that geographical mobility is one of the prerequisites for finding a job, very little space is given to how they think it might be a useful device for advancing their careers.

Interestingly, two basic categories of mobility projects emerge from the essays. The first one is a more realistic account of mobility, largely based on the migration experience as lived by students' families; their stories seem to retrace the history of Italian migration as an inescapable destiny. They describe their mobility patterns as a continuum in the history of their families, where mobility is cited as a good example to follow, as an already experimented model that can be repeated:

During that summer I remember I went to London to visit my sister. Just for fun, she came with me to a job interview in an important hotel and I got it. ... I was encouraged to go abroad by my family since all my cousins had a family and a successful career outside Italy. ... With the money earned working in the hotel I left my mother to go to Germany. There I stayed with a cousin of mine until I had found a job ...

– Student, female

The second pattern of imagined mobility is characterised by the extensive use of references to the media world: students are inspired by images of and make frequent references to characters belonging to TV series, films, video games and books in order to describe both chosen destinations and migration patterns. In these narratives of media-influenced mobilities young people imagine possible life events within fictional situations borrowed from the media:

I decided to have a break and to leave Italy with a friend of mine. We went to the USA, precisely to Las Vegas, a city that has always struck me for its elegance and brilliance. I began to gamble in one of the most beautiful casinos, the Palms,²⁵ where I won a lot of money. Nevertheless, I left the casino because I wanted to visit the beautiful landscapes of Nevada. ... I had to board the Grimaldi Lines Grand Gabon as a sailor. ... I flew to London in Britain. Once I had landed there I called my parents to say hello, then I boarded my second flight to New York. ... In New York I boarded my third flight to Baltimore in Maryland where someone from the shipping company was waiting for me. They drove me to a Hotel in Jacksonville.²⁶ It was night and that city of the USA was beautiful all well lit with skyscrapers that made me feel happy.

– Student, male

Looking at these narratives, what is the role of mobility in students' imagined biographies?

Mobility is a dominant narrative in contemporary society. The idea that people, goods and ideas are on the move more than ever, while infrastructures allow connections between different places and between people and places has led to the so-called mobility turn. This has been defined as "a different way of thinking through the

25. The Palm Casino is a reference to the reality show series "The Jersey Shore".

26. Jacksonville is the name of the city where part of the Twilight Series takes place.

character of economic, social and political relationships. Such a turn is spreading in and through the social sciences, mobilising analyses that have been historically static, fixed and concerned with predominantly a-spatial ‘social structures’ (Urry 2007:6). And mobility as we have discussed in the previous paragraph is at the core of EU policies.

At first glance, students seem familiar with and are well integrated into this new mobile society, given that their imagined biographies are “mobile biographies”. Most of the time, mobility is portrayed as a positive feature of their imagined lives, being viewed as one of the key devices that facilitate the expandability (the degree to which future possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting) of young people’s imagined futures (Mishes 2009). For many students, the prospect of perceiving the future as increasing and opening up (the start of a new career, a love story) is closely linked to mobility. On the other hand, going back home has negative associations with a moment of closure and decline (family in need, illness, divorce or an economic downturn).

At the same time, imagined mobility very rarely takes the form of a concrete project of mobility, something which is carefully planned to achieve a particular end. It remains a sort of magical device that can bring about a change in young people’s lives. Mobility is simply a way to disconnect from a present experience and a situation that is generally difficult to escape from, rather than being an informed and reflective attempt at connecting to a different reality.

As a gift, my parents paid for me to have a holiday in Paris. From that moment my life started. My intention was to stay there for a short period but as soon as I landed I went to a café to have a coffee and I found an interesting job offer on a bulletin board in the café.

– Student, female

Mobility as a magical device seems to offer the way out and be the only means to bypass uncertainty; it is a common trait in youths’ biographies that somehow seems to substitute concrete biographical projects in young people’s narratives of the future.

A deeper analysis of the role of geographical mobility as perceived in young people’s essays reveals how imagined mobility is viewed as a spaceless, easy and weightless experience. Whether discussing the prospect of leaving the country in order to find a job or going on holiday with friends, everything is lumped together as one unproblematic, “taken for granted” experience. The space in which mobility occurs resembles space on the Internet, a global and virtual space where there are no references to territorial borders or to the specificities of locales. In this abstract idea of space there are no geographical distances: in students’ narratives, going to New York or to London is the same thing.

EMPOWERING YOUTH: IMAGINED MOBILITY AND CAPACITY TO ASPIRE

Although reading young people’s narratives of an imagined future cannot predict what they will actually do in the future, it can tell us what kind of images/representations of mobility they have, what kind of acquired knowledge they show about what

it means to be mobile today (about destinations, obstacles and what to expect) as well as what kind of strategies they think about and which sources might nurture their aspirations of mobility.

While the young respondents in our research have taken on board the idea that mobility is the future, it remains an imagined mobility that rarely takes on the form of a project of mobility. It appears to be mostly a dream perceived as the only means to open the door of opportunity in young people's lives.

Although it may be true that dreaming about mobility can be a positive factor that gives hope and inspiration to young people, in the absence of more specific skills and the knowledge to transform dreams of mobility into a project it can easily turn into passivity and defeat. Being mobile and experiencing mobility implies the existence of opportunities (Erasmus for instance) but also involves the capacity to see mobility as a "realistic" possibility and to give this possibility a tangible meaning in a real-life project.

In light of this scenario, we would like to offer a few concluding remarks.

First, despite the fact that what we might call the rhetoric of mobility is a positive manifestation of the idea of mobility, it does not necessarily empower young people, especially if it has become a sort of benchmark measuring the value of personal projects and is overwhelmingly influenced by media discourse. According to Appadurai, the "capacity to aspire (and thus the aspiration to mobility) conceived as a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations compounds the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes that surround them (2004: 251)". In other words, an abstract and universal model of mobility risks missing the target of really empowering and not merely fostering mobility in Europe.

Second, empowering mobility needs to take into account how cultures actually enact mobility and thus reframe mobility aspirations as a cultural category (grounded in different social and cultural contexts) rather than an individual trait. Discourses and practices of mobility, for instance, are markedly different in different countries.²⁷ It seems axiomatic that policy makers must be aware of all these cultural differences in approaching the creation of a culture of mobility through capacity building.

Third, if we look at the way young people describe their future and envisage mobilities, there is almost no trace of support from educational institutions, in terms of providing awareness of mobility opportunities or the empowerment benefits of mobilities. Even in the cases of students pursuing career paths in mobile professions (such as tourism or the navy), it is the background of their family's migration experience on the one hand or media narratives on the other that prevail over other forms of socialisation. This can be a specific feature of the Italian case, in which the effectiveness of the education system in helping young people to plan their futures seems in fact to be distinctly low. In fact, according to the Eurobarometer survey *Youth on the Move*, only a very limited number of young people in Italy described the guidance and counselling received during school education on further education and training

27. See Holdsworth C. (2006).

options open to them (20%) or on future employment opportunities (16%) as “good” or “very good”. In both cases, Italy has the second lowest approval rate.

Finally, the influence of media narratives and of what has been called the celebrity culture are factors that have to be taken into account as elements shaping young people’s aspirations to mobility. If these elements constitute a powerful substratum of youth imagination across Europe, a naïve use of these elements is more likely to be dominant where the possibility to experiment with more realistic opportunities is more limited.

Herein lies the need for integrating practical skills and cognitive awareness. These are both needed in order to turn dreams of mobility into realistic projects.

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