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What is the urban without physical mobilities? COVID-19-induced immobility in the mobile risk society

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ABSTRACT

Since the World Health Organization's (WHO) declared the Coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic, the virus has invaded lives around the globe. The ongoing health, social and economic crisis that followed forced urban life, business, culture, community etc. into idle mode for weeks resulting from mandated immobility. What was once taken for granted as the essence of urban experience such as cultural activities, meeting friends, relatives and colleagues in public space or in professional encounters, disappeared overnight. Free movement became significantly restricted all over the world. It seemed that immobility, social and physical distancing, and isolation were the only antidote to the fast-moving virus. For many people, working from home while also schooling their children and providing social care at a distance, peak activity at maximum physical immobility became the "new normal." A culture emerged where rules and norms of mobilities previously taken for granted were re-negotiated and re-defined. Before the crisis and despite the negative ecological side effects, mobility has been positively connotated as a signifier for progress and success. Under the Corona regime mobility turned into a life-threatening risk. The theory of reflexive modernization, risk society and the mobilities paradigm are used to discuss these contemporary shifts and transformations.

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Introduction

Since the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the Coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic in 11 March 2020, the COVID-19 virus has invaded lives around the globe. As a sort of stowaway the virus traveled within people's bodies through the global infrastructures of the 'mobile risk society' (Freudendal-Pedersen 2018; Kesselring 2008). Day by day, journey by journey, handshake by handshake, hug by hug, COVID-19 spread around the globe aided by what has been considered an unstoppable path of seamless mobility. And – paradoxically – from one day to the next, people, supply chains, businesses, whole production systems, cultural activities, and social life became immobilized. Locally, free movement was restricted significantly in many places around the world and globally free movement came to an almost complete standstill. Immobility seemed to be the only antidote against the fast-moving virus. People around the globe ended up in a sort of 'raging standstill,' as French philosopher Paul Virilio might have called it. But a raging standstill that for many people still meant peak activity at maximum physical immobility, through virtual mobilities. Online presence replaced physical co-presence, creating an even more immobile situation when walking to the colleagues' offices, coffee machine, classrooms, meeting rooms, and copy machine

was replaced by intense working days in front of the computer. Work underwent an enormous compression since idle times between meetings and transit suddenly have disappeared. For some of us this had to be combined with home schooling and increased domestic workloads caused by full-time family occupancy of the homes. In some cases, this entailed an unbearable social situation, such as for a man in Paris who was fined for leaving his house without a permit, unable to stand being together with his six other family members 24/7.

Against this background, modern societies around the globe have developed hectic routines to accelerate and propel the digitalization of work, leisure, and interaction in general; 'Digital mobilities' (Urry 2007) has become the new normal. Activities previously assumed to be fully dependent on physical attendance, such as medical appointments, field work and even the Friday beer with colleagues, were suddenly taking place online. The virus—and of course political, medical, and ethical stakeholders in the end—interfered into social, cultural, economic, educational, and communicative spaces and changed modes of conduct, the normative framework of social interaction, and even of manners and culture. Suddenly, a culture of 'immobile mobility' (Bonß, Kesselring, and Weiss 2004, 276), where high levels of social, interactive, and collaborative mobility come together with low levels of physical/spatial mobility developed. Rules and norms previously taken for granted regarding how, when, with whom, and where to travel have been re-negotiated and re-defined. The very character of mobility, this deeply rooted and embedded general principle of modernity, has changed casting doubt on its cultural-, normative-, and affirmative connotations and meanings. How this unfolds in the future remains to be seen.

This paper investigates how this 'new normality' can impact the urban scale with a focus on sustainability and automobility. It connects empirical observations from urban practice, the culture of automobilities, and the aim for more sustainable futures with theoretical reflections. The theory of reflexive modernization and (mobile) risk society and the mobilities paradigm are used to explain contemporary shifts and transformations in the concept of mobility and travel.

Mobile risk society, acceleration & fear

The late German sociologist Ulrich Beck pointed out that the dynamics of post-industrial societies are increasingly challenged by man-made, self-produced risks such as nuclear power, genetic engineering, climate change, congestion, and – from today's perspective – the COVID-19 virus. In one way or another they represent modern uncertainties, insecurities and unintended consequences of procedures, technologies, and political-economic decisions that have been successful to date. Toozé (2020) for instance relates Beck's reflections on the consequences of nuclear pollution to our ongoing struggle over face masks:

'Once the invisible has been let in, it will soon not be just the spirits of pollutants that determine the thought and the life of people. This can all be disputed, it can polarize, or it can fuse together. New communities and alternative communities arise, whose world views, norms and certainties are grouped around the center of invisible threats' (Beck 1992, 74).

In Beck's terminology, socio-cultural change is not so much the consequence of political intentions, policies and strategical decisions; rather, change is propelled by the need to limit the negative side-effects and impacts of economic, political, and social activities. Building on Beck's (1992) notion of the 'risk society' the concept of the 'mobile risk society' (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2018; Kesselring 2008) focuses on the unintended consequences and the disruptive dynamics of the ongoing mobilization of modern societies. It conceives climate change and the role of transport as a jointly enforcing factor, as being the fundamental challenge, threat, and the disruptive process that questions the modern way of life and the consumption built upon it. Today mobility is built into so many institutional and organizational routines, representing the essence of life, and immobility puts sociality and business at risk. This brings to the very fore what the mobile risk society is all about: a society of ultimate acceleration, and at the same time of 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1990) as

well as ‘time-space-distanciation’ (Giddens 1997). Since Marx’ times modernity has undergone a unique social and physical mobilization unprecedented in history. COVID-19 teaches us how vulnerable this model we have developed is. Through mobility, modern societies have developed highly sophisticated and powerful infrastructures for speed, flow, connectivity, and social cohesion. These mobility regimes accompanying the materialities of the mobile society are centered around the technical artifact of the automobile (Urry 2004) as the technology that could provide freedom, flexibility and especially now with COVID-19 increasingly safety and security. As we will see below, the concept of sustainable mobilities relies on introducing a modal shift where the private car is no longer center stage of modern mobilities but rather part of a system of mobility as a service. Before COVID-19 this was part of an increasingly optimistic agenda due to an increased focus on the consequences of mobilities on climate change. What will happen now, especially with urban mobility, in the light of the threats from COVID-19 is an open question.

Contemporary cities have been built as urban environments for cars. They have been constructed for fast and seamless travel and are oriented toward tempo and spatial permeability to provide the ground for the individualized ‘zero-friction society’, its movements, and motorized vehicles (Hajer 1995; Flink 1975). People in Europe, no matter where, no matter how wealthy, no matter how remote or central their homes, all live in an ‘automobile society’. Even if people do not possess their own cars, they live, work, and interact in built environments pre-structured by automobile rationalities. The logistics of modern societies – even if organized in multimodal transport chains – rely on individually driven motorized vehicles, from passenger cars to trucks and container – based networks of delivery and transport (Ritzer 2010; Hesse 2008; Birtchnell, Savatzky, and Urry 2015). Since humans only have two ‘instruments’ or ‘techniques’ to be social – communication and travel – the whole political and philosophical idea of cosmopolitanism and world society is grounded in mobilities (Urry 2007; Beck 2018; Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Wallerstein 2001; Braudel 1988).

The automobility system, with car producers worldwide as key players, has been extremely stabilized and almost unchallenged at least since the 1950s. Even in its early forms, the system has been deployed with a historically unique capacity to persist and branch out to many nations and economies beyond the USA. One of the reasons for its strength and resilience was that it coincided with the far-reaching normative social transformations of individualization (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Weber 1978). The car met:

... existing cultural values, needs, and social practices to which its use could be adapted. (...) With the introduction, (...) new cultural uses were discovered and invented. At the end of the day, the car didn’t generate anything completely new but rather its existence and design reinforced “cultural values, especially individuality and mobility, which were folded into a new value pattern” (...) (Burkart 1994, 220).¹

The industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th century propelled the ‘centrifugal tendencies’ of modern individuals to transgress traditional boundaries ‘spatially, economically, and mentally’ (Simmel 1990, 47) and helped them gain upward social mobility. This basic internal social structuration of mobility, flows, and traffic has often been overlooked and underestimated. The transformative power of the car and the whole system of automobility originates precisely from this inner social drive; the car opened up new windows of opportunity that could be used and filled by individuals to achieve success, to climb the social stratification ladder, and to realize their own projects and plans. As such, automobility is a principle almost written into the urban fabric. It is the modern promise of individual freedom, development, success, and wealth that makes automobility so strong in urban planning and design (Freudental-Pedersen 2020, 2009). It is the mobility potential, the ‘motility’ (Kaufmann 2002), stored and represented in this modern iron cage called automobile that gave people the chance to connect a mode of transport with their individual dreams and hopes for a good mobile life. This is visible in the historical and social context of the early 20th century and after WW II, where people wanted and needed to escape from precarious social and economic situations. This also explains the massive energy in the process of ‘compressed modernity’ that is currently underway in China, where 600 million people have moved from poverty to the middle class in a process

coined the 'elevator effect' (Beck 1992). Modern society, with the car not only as a technology but also as a promise, has increased speed and created an accelerated world.

In his investigations of the seemingly unstoppable speed of modernity Hartmut Rosa named present times as an acceleration society:

... the history of modernity seems to be characterized by a wide-ranging speed-up of all kinds of technological, economic, social, and cultural processes and by an increase of the general pace of life. In terms of its structural and cultural impact on modern society, this change in the temporal structures and patterns of modernity appears to be just as pervasive as the impact of comparable processes of individualization or rationalization. Just as with the latter, it seems, social acceleration is not a steady process but evolves in waves (most often brought about by new technologies or forms of socio-economic organization), with each new wave meeting considerable resistance as well as partial reversals. Most often, a wave of acceleration is followed by a rise in the 'discourse of acceleration,' in which cries for deceleration in the name of human needs and values are voiced but eventually die down. (Rosa 2013, 3).

Climate change and COVID-19 are both examples of events that feed new life into the deceleration discussion. We will return to this below, but first we will continue to focus on acceleration. Rosa mentions three elements of acceleration: technologies, social change, and social life. Rosa defines these three processes from different outsets. The technological acceleration is 'intentional, *goal-directed* processes of transport, communication, and production' (Rosa 2013, 6) that he places within society in opposition to the acceleration of social change which is a process of society itself. According to Rosa, the acceleration of social life 'is neither logically nor causally entailed by the first two, but rather seems, at least at first glance, paradoxical with respect to technological acceleration' (Rosa 2003, 8). This is based on the presumption that more efficient and better technologies are supposed to free up more time, and this is exactly the promise that new technologies are promoted with. Autonomous vehicles are a perfect example of this. From a mobilities perspective, autonomous vehicles, as a new technology, promise an acceleration of speed (less congestion), social change (more equality for people not able to drive), and a change in social life (own time while moving). The promise of the autonomous vehicle is embedded in techno-centric planning, where smart solutions form the path toward handling climate change, etc. This can be understood as an example of what Beck (2008) would call 'manufactured uncertainties' (Beck 2008, 191), i.e. uncertainties dependent on human decisions and created by society. The automated car will (if ever implemented on a full scale) be collectively imposed and unavoidable for the individual. The promise and implantation of autonomous vehicles is based on institutionalized expectation of control and insurance. It relies on an idea of insurance protection (private or state-organized) and has a two-fold function from the perspective of social theory, namely, '*neutralizing damage* and thereby *neutralizing fear*' (Beck 2009, 139). The promise is that the unintended consequences from automobility will be neutralized with the automated vehicle.

This is contrary to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which states, in order to neutralize damage, have not been neutralizing fear but instead have imposed fear as a strategy to control citizens' mobilities. As a collective global strategy, fear has been installed as a control mechanism, and social distancing has become a positive quality.² That something like the COVID-19 pandemic could happen is not a total surprise. In his TED Talk from 2015 Bill Gates mentioned this several times.³ He argues that the greatest risk for a future global catastrophe is in fact a pandemic. And he goes on to argue that sufficient resources have not been invested into prevention or control of a disaster like this. With respect to a different catastrophe, Ulrich Beck gave a television interview in the wake of the Fukushima powerplant meltdown caused by an earthquake and a subsequent tsunami. The interviewer asked Beck how to handle these natural disasters. Beck's answer, which closely relates to the COVID-19 pandemic, was that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. There are events in nature, but the disaster comes from the modern idea that we can control these events. The fear caused by COVID-19 entails the realization that in the mobile risk society this disaster cannot be controlled, at least not without taking drastic measures that turn the order of a cosmopolitan world upside-down. It is, in other words, the leading idea of rationality and certainty that is collapsing because it becomes

very clear that we live in an interconnected world that we cannot control without bringing everything to a standstill. What we have learned to see as normality is a constant progress, constant growth, constant mobility driven by more and better technologies. There are so many things that we consider to be controllable. But the paradox is that these institutions that are designed to control risks have instead produced uncontrollability and induced risks and uncertainties. The question arises as to what role the perceived risks will have for cultures and practices of a mobile risk society in the wake of COVID-19. Will the private car as the 'safe' passage between immobility and mobility cement its dominance over urban lives? This is an open question, but we will try to speculate in relation to the urban scale.

Urban lives–mobilities–physical distance

Cities have always been the product of multiple mobilities. In the global age, flows of capital, energy, and raw materials, labor force, vehicles, tourists, freight, information, data, waste etc. have become the shaping elements of cities. They form their identities and economic power, and position them on the global scale within national and global labor markets and their meanings in the global cultural and political economy. What keeps cities going is their means of connectivity; how accessible they are, and who and what flows in and out of the urban space. In other words, multiple movements constitute and mark windows of opportunities for people, businesses, art and culture and the social, economic, and cultural networks within these cities. The networks of people, organizations, companies, stakeholders, socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural players and initiatives generate a city's mobility capital. Today, every modern city wants to attract travelers, capital and a huge diversity of products, groceries and all kinds of artifacts. But at the same time, the massiveness and sometimes even the violent character of these flows threaten urban societies and environments. They can overstretch and overload their systems and capacities to manage movements. In European cities, for example, the daily amount of road traffic is pushing them to the edge when the daily convoy heads out of the city for work, while the centers are hit by constant flows of commuters, cars, trains, and travelers. In this respect, too, many people, goods, and resources traveling the city's streets, railways, rivers, and airspaces can challenge urban systems to their limits, intervene in public spaces and threaten the quality of life for those living there, seeking recreation, secure spaces, fresh air, peaceful places for children, leisure activities etc.

The Coronavirus crisis has highlighted both sides of this paradox: urban life, business, community, and so forth have been idle for weeks. What was once taken for granted as the essence of urban experience, cultural activities, meeting friends, relatives and colleagues in public space or in professional encounters, has disappeared overnight because of national and regional lockdowns. But at the same time, a new city has emerged, a city where noise levels have been drastically reduced, and bird songs have become part of the new normal. Acceleration came to a halt and the materialities of what a livable city or a human-scale city (Gehl 2010) could be, flourished during the pandemic. This has also highlighted the urban/rural division. The effects of COVID-19 had less impact on everyday life and were in many ways less problematic for people living in the countryside. In contrast, being in close connection with many people be it in urban space, cinemas, concerts, public transport and so forth is an integrated part of urban everyday lives. In the 'raging standstill' many urban dwellers escaped to their second home in the countryside where the pace and the mobility have not changed significantly

Urban formations, agglomerations, and megacities, in particular, have a quite ambivalent relationship towards movement and mobility. As Georg Simmel clearly observed at the beginning of the 20th century, both movement and mobility are at the core of what we consider to be urban. Urbanity as a social phenomenon is a very specific form of social life in (often bigger) cities where mobility, speed, social indifference, etc. play a key role in how people live, interact, work together, and have conflicts. Urban spaces function as common meeting spots for urban inhabitants on a daily basis. COVID-19 put a halt to this. One of the most important meeting places in Copenhagen is the Harbor

Park located in Islands Brygge, close to the inner city and next to the city's biggest harbor bath. The park opened in 1995 and the harbor bath in 2002. This location has since grown in popularity and stands today as a hallmark for the green and blue livable Copenhagen. Early in the lockdown this was not a major problem, since March is still fairly windy and cold in Copenhagen. But once the sun started to come out, this has changed. At that time, gatherings of more than ten people were prohibited. While compliance with this ordinance was generally high, the proximity between groups of ten people then became another complicating factor. This is what happened at the harbor park and on the 25th of April, the police closed down the areas so that only through-traffic was allowed. The harbor park was closed for a week and reopened with a different layout as seen in the below picture. As indicated on the sign, no more than ten people are permitted in each square, and this group of ten has to consist of friends or family (Figure 1).

This was the first place in Copenhagen that was locked down, but as the temperature began rising over the summer, the police became increasingly busy with keeping people apart. The noise and waste from people partying outside also became a significant problem, as bars and clubs were still restricted. Many of the very popular outdoor spaces in Copenhagen are located in areas with very expensive apartments, so the fear from Corona became mixed with the annoyance of noise. One of the major problems in Denmark has been keeping the young generation in particular separated. This was significantly easier during the first two months, when all schools and universities were closed down, but as the educational institutions began to open up and spring arrived, it increasingly became an issue. For the urban dweller, the park or square has the same function as the garden has for the rural dweller (some urban dwellers do have balconies and a small amount have gardens) and after two months of social contact limited only to virtual encounters, many needed to get out and smell and feel the city again. And they needed to reconnect with the community the city offers.



Figure 1. Photo: Islands Brygge in Copenhagen with the lawn divided. © Malene Freudendal-Pedersen