

1 “We Shall Not Be Moved”

On the Politics of Immobility

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“I am going nowhere.” That’s Willie Corduff, a farmer, protesting the proposed landfall of Shell’s Corrib Gas Pipeline at Glengad Beach, near Rosspport in the West of Ireland. Corduff was jailed for ninety-four days in 2005 for refusing to allow the company to enter his land to lay a high-pressure, raw gas pipeline. Reflecting on his own resistance to the pipeline, which saw him and his son arrested and jailed for obstructing the development, Rosspport lobster and crab fisherman Pat O’Donnell observed, “This could go on forever” (Domhnaill 2010). By “this” he meant the political struggle of his community to retain some degree of control over the immediate material conditions of their economic and social lives.

This chapter is not about pipelines or fishers or farmers. Instead, my aim is to ask a few questions about the moral valorization of the mobile Internet and the prevalent cultural designation of mobile access to information and communication networks as something basically “good,” something like freedom. More broadly, these are questions about the critical status of the norm of mobility itself, upon which this valorization of mobile and mobilizing technologies at least partly hangs. My concern is with the status of the norm of mobility in relation to the possibility of politics and it is in this respect that the story of the good people of Rosspport serves as an instructive introduction. Cultural geographer Timothy Cresswell (2010, 21) defines politics as “the social relations that involve the production and distribution of power,” and the politics of mobility as “the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them,” adding that “speeds, slowness and immobilities are all related in ways that are thoroughly infused with power and its distribution.” This is undoubtedly true but, in what follows, I propose a slight shift in emphasis, from politics understood as the *distribution* of power to politics understood as the *disruption* of power and, correspondingly, from the politics of *mobility* to the politics of *immobility*.

Among the six elements Cresswell (2010, 26) lists as comprising the politics of mobility is the question “when and how does it stop?” By this he means to draw attention to the tendency of contemporary injustices to take the form of friction, experienced by those whose mobility is impeded

when they might otherwise choose to keep moving. Involuntary immobility enforced *upon* those who occupy the lower registers of various socio-economic hierarchies is certainly one manner in which inegalitarian and unjust distributions of power are currently manifested and maintained. However, I would like to explore the opposite dynamic, whereby immobilities enforced *by* those who occupy these lower registers upon those who would prefer that they, and things, just *keep moving* become a significant source of political disruption. Cresswell's politics of mobility implies that the question of "where and when does it stop?" refers primarily to the mobility of individuals who would like to keep moving but are prevented from doing so by powerful actors and structures over which they have little or no influence. The operative question in this situation becomes: "Is stopping a choice, or is it forced?" (Cresswell 2010, 26). By contrast, from the perspective of a politics of *immobility*, we might instead consider that "where and when does it stop?" is often the question asked by those who (like the people of Rosspott) find themselves in a situation where they have no choice but to act, often collectively, to disrupt some force that is moving inexorably against them. Of course, such disruptions often take time. Here, I suggest that in a material context in which mobility and its technologies (including things like gas pipelines and wireless telephone networks) are structurally related to economic power and therefore culturally normalized, the possibility of politics might rely precisely on "going nowhere" and "going on forever."

The cultural valorization of mobile information and communication technologies (which has now been fairly generalized in commercial advertising, popular culture and economic development discourse) relies on a simultaneous, and perhaps even prior, elevation of mobility itself to the status of an unimpeachable norm, one that corresponds roughly with freedom, and which via this correspondence articulates with liberal discourses of rights, justice and democracy. Cresswell (2010, 21) captures this well when he writes:

Some of the foundational narratives of modernity have been constructed around the brute fact of moving. Mobility as liberty, mobility as progress. Everyday language reveals some of the meanings that accompany the idea of movement. We are always trying to get somewhere. No one wants to be stuck or bogged down.

As he points out in his earlier book *On the Move*, this articulation reaches back to what is arguably the founding expression of a distinctly modern political imaginary, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes, influenced by Galileo, presents the cosmos, including the world and its beings, as a system of objects in motion that rest only when forcibly stopped by external impediment (Cresswell 2006, 14–16). Motion, a natural state equated with freedom, is good; involuntary rest, ultimately equated with death, is bad. Hobbes's (1968) insight was that completely unregulated motion

amongst human beings in social situations would lead to a proliferation of violent collisions. In the state of nature, unrestricted freedom of movement degenerates into its opposite: paralysis and death, and so Hobbes described the wager of society in terms of an artificial social contract, in which individuals exchange complete freedom and mobility for partial freedom and mobility, secured by a sovereign authorized to protect individual bodies in motion from other bodies in motion. Since the time of Hobbes, in both theory and practice, we have seen wide variation in the practical balance between individual freedom or mobility and the extent of sovereign authority, ranging from authoritarian situations in which the margin of individual freedom and mobility is thin, to liberal democratic situations in which the scope of individual mobility, rights and freedom is thought to be relatively broad by comparison.

The point is this: the moral valorization of mobility did not originate with the iPhone. The equation of freedom with mobility has been the central precept of the modern political imaginary from the outset. Accordingly, questioning the moral valorization of the mobile Internet in the contemporary context necessarily entails questioning the moral valorization of mobility itself in this imaginary, and while Hobbes (and many others after) might have been prepared to accept the equation of mobility and freedom as an objective, universal, scientifically established “fact,” we know that that this proposition, and the norms that have been derived from it, were and are—like all knowledge propositions and norms—culturally produced and sustained. Indeed, it is the cultural and historical specificity of the ontological equation of the human with freedom, and of freedom with mobility (equations which, by the way, articulate very nicely with certain ideas about technology and market economies) that invites us to interrogate mobility as a norm that is contingent rather than necessary.

Among the things upon which the critical salience of the norm of mobility is contingent is the differential manner in which particular subjects or classes of subjects are afforded or denied it. Consider: the ongoing reality of denial of entry to asylum seekers at national borders; the threat of bodily violence that prevents women from moving safely through urban spaces; the spatial confinement of troublesome, typically racialized, people and populations by state authorities; the architectural denial of access to public spaces experienced daily by people with disabilities; the importance of mobile access to communication networks in uprisings against authoritarian regimes; and the isolation of senior citizens unable to get groceries or fill prescriptions because they cannot risk an icy sidewalk. Confronted with all this, categorical denial of the political urgency of mobility and its technologies is difficult to sustain. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello observe in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005, 361), mobility is a crucial nexus of exploitation in highly networked economies: “In fact, in a connexionist world, mobility—the ability to move around autonomously not only in geographical space, but also between people, or in mental space, between

ideas—is an essential quality of great men, such that the little people are characterized primarily by their fixity (their inflexibility).”

If mobility equals greatness and immobility poverty, then the prescription would seem obvious: get moving. However, the redistribution of certain forms of technologically enabled mobility and “flexibility” such that the little people might “enjoy” more of these seems to suit the interests of the great men just fine. How else to explain the consistency with which the merchants of transnational communicative capitalism express their claims upon our attention, bodies, money, time, creativity and imagination in terms of the imperative of incessant movement? Mobility—of information, communication and access to them; and of working people and consumers—and its contemporary technologies, are both culturally fetishized and essential structural conditions of contemporary economic and political power. Ours is a situation in which the experience of at least certain forms of mobility is relatively (though perhaps not perfectly equally) well-distributed, and in many cases even compulsory. This is the situation “enjoyed” by most of the working- and middle-class citizens of Euro-American capitalist liberal-democracies. With important limitations, exceptions and gradations indexed to age, gender, ethnicity and ability, these are people for whom both the experience and priority of mobility, especially as mediated by emerging information and communication technologies, is more or less *normal*. When Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, 361) write: “Great men do not stand still. Little people remain rooted to the spot,” they express perfectly the “mobilitist” ideology of networked capitalism. They also seem to appreciate the sociological ambiguity of this characterization. For it is far from clear that in responding to the ideological imperative to keep moving, the little people accomplish much beyond delivering themselves more effectively into their own exploitation by great men. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, 468) observe, when it comes to “loosening the grip of capitalism as an oppressive instance . . . One critical orientation, which is seemingly paradoxical given that mobility and liberation have hitherto been closely associated, is to be sought in challenging mobility as a prerequisite and incontestable value.” Whereas a politics of distribution might recommend extending the presumed benefits of mobility and its technologies universally, a politics of disruption might instead require rejection of the very premise upon which this apparently egalitarian distributive inclination is based.

This proposition relies on a specification that associates politics with those activities by which an established horizon of consensus is disrupted. Such a specification is given by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010a, vii), who characterizes consensus as the sense that “what is, is all there is.” We live, Rancière says, in more or less consensual times. He (2010a, x) contrasts consensus with another way of being in the world, a way of being that “lays claim to one present against another and affirms that the visible, thinkable and possible can be described in many ways. This other way has a name. It is called politics.” Rancière (2010a, 2) goes on

to write that “Politics is the way of concerning oneself with human affairs based on the mad presupposition that anyone is as intelligent as anyone else and that at least one more thing can always be done other than what is being done.” Becoming political means refusing to take the present state of things as given. It means disrupting the consensus that says that what is, is *all* there is, and that nothing can be done other than what *is* being done. Becoming political, as Rancière (2010a, 3) puts it, means claiming “the right to attend to the future.” Such politics entail judgment and action that alter the parameters of the possible and the impossible in any given situation. It is the sort of politics that can be distinguished from what Rancière (1999, 28–30) elsewhere calls “police,” referring to those agencies, practices and institutions—including the institutions of liberal democratic government—whose function it is to contain the disruptive possibility of politics, even as they give the impression of it.

In what relation to this sort of politics do mobility and its technologies stand? As discussed above, mobility is foundational to modern western conceptions of freedom. Another conspicuous aspect of Western modernity is the promise that freedom-as-mobility can be delivered by technology. Modern western culture has thus reserved a special place in its imaginary for transportation technologies—trains and railways, automobiles and highways, airplanes and skyways, rockets and space travel—that were supposed to deliver on the promise of freedom as technologically enabled movement through space. But no mere transportation technology could ever truly fulfill the ultimate dream of mobility: the dream of being in two places at one time. It was only when electricity supposedly made it possible to liberate communication from its reliance on transportation that progress toward this dream began in earnest, via a succession of communication technologies and accompanying rhetorics that have culminated in contemporary digital networks and loose talk about the annihilation of distance, time-space compression, the empire of speed and interactivity in real time.

As Jonathan Sterne (2006) has persuasively argued, communication and transportation are perhaps not so easily, or so advisedly, separated as either James Carey’s canonical account of the telegraph or residual preoccupations with the symbolic over the material dimensions of communication would have us believe. It is thus commendable that the “mobilities paradigm,” as it has been formulated by John Urry (2007, 147), includes the corporeal travel of bodies and the physical movement of objects (i.e., transportation) as well as the imaginative, virtual and communicative movement of symbols and representations. Scholars of mobility know very well that mobility entails both transportation and communication (perhaps the missing term here is *mediation*, of which both transportation and communication are forms). In the popular (and certainly the commercial) imaginary, freedom-as-mobility specifically implies a dream of spatial transcendence (the dream of being in two, or more, places at once) that emerging information and communication technologies are promoted as uniquely configured

to deliver. It is in this context that something like the moral valorization of the mobile Internet begins to make sense. If freedom is identical to transcending the limitations enforced upon the movement of our bodies through space, then maybe with mobile technologies we really are there.

Unless, that is, mobility and freedom are actually about time, not space. Significantly, at the very moment Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, 468) begin to consider the possibility of resistance to, and liberation from, the “new spirit of capitalism” in which mobility and its technologies play a central role, their attention shifts from the spatial to the temporal register. “The first problem, an absolutely concrete one,” they write, “concerns the use of time.” They elaborate: “Maybe a step in the direction of liberation today involves the possibility of slowing down the pace of connections, without thereby fearing that one no longer exists for others or sinking into oblivions and, ultimately, exclusion.” It is at this moment that the possibility of a disruptive politics of immobility suddenly appears on the horizon. In a lecture at the 2009 conference on “The Idea of Communism” held at the Birckbeck Institute in London, Rancière (2010b, 168) said something striking about the temporal dimension of a specifically egalitarian form of freedom. “The emancipation of the workers,” he said, “means the affirmation that work can wait.”

Work can wait. Two things are happening here. The first is that freedom is identified as a question of the division of labor, and is located specifically in the experience of workers and their work. The second is that the question of freedom is here registered as a question not of transcendence or control over space, but control over time, the time of work, and just as mobile information and communication technologies bear on the promise of the former, so too do they bear on the possibility of the latter. We know that struggles over the time of work—the duration and structure of the workday and week; the age at which people begin and end their lifetime of work; the pace, speed and rhythm of production; the value of a waged hour—have perennially been a focal point for workers’ struggles to recover something of freedom in the context of capitalist relations of production. We also have a wealth of outstanding critical scholarship concerning the manner in which digital technologies have been intimately involved in the proliferation of restructured “flexible” work arrangements that can hardly be said to have finally delivered emancipation to people who work. The question is whether technologies of mobile access to information and communication networks can reasonably be said to increase the chances that working people might be emancipated from the temporal demands of work. This is an empirical question whose definitive answer would have to reckon with the potentially great diversity of individual experiences of work in the mobile, networked economy. However, it seems that whether we are talking about Terranova’s (2004) free laborers, Lazzarato’s (1996) immaterial laborers, or professional, creative, administrative, clerical or service workers of any type (Head 2003), it would be difficult to believe that technologies of the

mobile Internet have *increased* their ability to contain the time they spend working. While mobility may make it possible for people to choose to work *wherever* (and therefore *whenever*) they want to, this is quite the opposite of an emancipated situation in which the work can *wait*, and it serves only to illustrate the political bankruptcy of the concept of choice. Every day we are surrounded by people who “choose” to work incessantly, not because mobile technologies mean that they *can*, but rather because the mere availability of these technologies suffices to make them accept that they must. The work cannot wait because mobile technology means it does not have to. The email, the unsorted post, need not pile up. Precisely because it delivers on the spatial dream of being in two places at once, the mobile Internet undermines the temporal dream of a day when the work can wait.

What might we expect from politics under technological conditions where work cannot wait? About a year ago I was invited to give talk at a university in Canada and had the occasion to sit down with a friend and colleague whose work I greatly admire. He was (and is) a genuine left intellectual, having been in the streets of Paris in May 1968 and having studied at the feet of Herbert Marcuse. I knew he kept a flat in Paris, and so I asked him if he knew about the Tarnac Nine, whose case I had recently become fascinated with. They were are a group of well-educated, middle-class young people who had read radical philosophers and moved to the mountain village of Tarnac in the Correze region of central France, where they established a communal farm, delivered food to the elderly and infirmed, reopened the general store as a cooperative, and established a local film society and lending library. In 2008, nine of these young people, now known as the Tarnac Nine, were arrested on terrorism charges, accused of sabotaging power lines in an act that threw high-speed train service around Paris into chaos for several hours. When I asked my colleague what he thought about this he was immediately visited by the specter of inconvenience: “That’s terrible,” he said, “disrupting the transit system just makes it hard for people *to get to work.*” After all, work cannot wait. Or maybe it can. This is what the normative expectation of mobility, the experience of mobility as *normal*, offers to the possibility of politics conceived under the sign of a disruption that alters the distribution of possibility and impossibility: a target.

This is the insight and lesson of the Tarnac Nine. The manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*, written by the Invisible Committee and widely attributed to the group, includes a scorching critique of the contemporary capitalist state and culture in France, and a call to political action that turns precisely on the question of mobility and its relationship to work. In the contemporary milieu, they observe, mobility is a condition not so much of work itself as of employability, of being constantly ready and available to work. Describing the networked system of flexible production as “a gigantic apparatus for psychic and physical *mobilization*,” they observe: “Mobility brings about a fusion of the two contradictory poles of work: here we participate in our own exploitation, and all participation is exploited”

(Invisible Committee 2009, 50–51). Under these conditions, nothing could be more abnormal or threatening than idleness or unavailability for occupation. As they (2009, 48) write: “The menace of a general demobilization is the specter that haunts the present system of production.”

In circumstances such as ours, where mobility is considered normal and normative, demobilization constitutes the sort of disruption that can open the field of political possibility. In this instance, not only the symbolic “ethos of mobility,” but also the *material infrastructure* of mobility, becomes a priority target against which to enact this disruption. Invoking the potential of “a single incident with a high-voltage wire,” they write that: “In order for something to rise up in the midst of the metropolis and open up other possibilities, the first act must be to interrupt its *perpetuum mobile*” (Invisible Committee 2009, 61). When Michele Alliot-Marie, the French Minister of the Interior who orchestrated the spectacular arrest of the Tarnac Nine, held up the fact that “they never use mobile telephones” as evidence of their “pre-terrorist” tendencies, she meant to say that anyone who wants to evade surveillance must be guilty of something, but she dared not speak the truth of the group’s more radical antagonism toward mobility itself (quoted in Toscano 2009, n.p.). This was an antagonism that, by its enactment, represented the sort of disruption that could make real the possibility that work can wait, and so loosen the grip of mobility’s normativity on the time of politics. Their purpose was not only to evade capture, but to sabotage mobility itself, as a condition of the possibility of politics:

The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is vulnerable. Its flows amount to more than the transportation of people and commodities. Information and energy circulate via wire networks, fibers and channels, and these can be attacked. Nowadays sabotaging the social machine with any real effect involves re-appropriating and reinventing the ways of interrupting its networks. How can a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless? How does one find the weak points in computer networks, or scramble radio waves and fill screens with white noise?

(Invisible Committee 2009, 111–112)

In their own more succinct words in relation to normative mobility, theirs was a politics of “fucking it all up” (Invisible Committee 2009, 112).

To those for whom the prospect of politics is properly contained within the normative framework of liberal publicity (intersubjective public dialogue supported by freedom of information and freedom of expression), such a position cannot sound anything but extreme. In situations where publicity is systematically denied by authority, access to systems of information, communication and mobility are crucial to the possibility of political judgment and action. In these cases, blank screens and blocked transit systems are tools of a regime desperately trying to hold on to power. On the

other hand, for those whose situation is saturated by liberal publicity but conspicuously devoid of politics, and who therefore think the possibility of politics relies upon exceeding the affordances of publicity, the normativity of mobility presents an interesting opportunity. In situations where transportation and communication collapse into systems of mobility that bind us to work that cannot wait, loosening the grip of power might require the sort of letting go that is characteristic of paralysis. Paralysis, the loss of the ability to move, the inability of a system to function properly, derives from the Greek *paraluisis*, whose root is the verb *luain*, which means to loosen, untie or release. In paralysis, unable to move, we might be released from that work which cannot wait (and the power it represents and materializes) to which we are otherwise bound by the normative imaginary and materiality of mobility. In losing mobility we might at last come undone, and find ourselves on the undecideable, unpredictable, unfamiliar terrain of politics.

In a culture that identifies movement with freedom, and immobility with powerlessness and death, it is hard to make the case for paralysis as opening onto the possibility of politics and the politics of possibility. We are embarrassed when Willie Corduff and his neighbors—the “little people” rooted to the spot on which they stand—say they are “going nowhere” because, after all, the gas does need to flow just as surely as people do need to get to work. For us, “This could go on forever” is an expression of frustration, not agency: it is what we say when we are stuck in a line that does not seem to be moving. Perhaps we misreckon the radical potential of paralysis in circumstances where power is enacted through symbolic and material infrastructures of mobility that together ensure that work cannot wait. Referring to some pre-Internet systems of mobility—garbage collection, the postal system, electric street lighting—in his elegant essay “Sir, Writing by Candlelight,” E. P. Thomson (1980) expresses this potential when he writes: “It is only when the dustbins linger in the street, the unsorted post piles up—it is only when the power workers throw across the switches and look out into a darkness of their own making—that the servants know suddenly the great unspoken fact about our society: their own daily power.”

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