Youth transitions, international student mobility and spatial reflexivity: being mobile?
DAVID CAIRNS, 2014
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Intra-European student mobility in international higher education circuits: Europe on the move
CHRISTOF VAN MOL, 2014
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These texts have been produced at a time when research into [inter]national student mobilities is itself in a state of transition. Many studies previously examined the physical movements of students within and between nations (e.g. Rickett, 1991). Yet, just within the pages of this journal, and in light of more globalised and neo-liberalised higher education (HE), contemporary research has begun to problematise such movements, examining why students may be mobile (Smith, Rerat and Sage, 2014); what influences their mobility choices (Hinton, 2011; Deakin, 2014) and how this may impact upon their future [im]mobility (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014) and both Cairns' and Van Mol's studies are well positioned in this growing corpus of literature.

Cairns' book *Youth Transitions, International Student Mobility and Spatial Reflexivity: Being Mobile?* presents an unapologetically partial account of student mobility which, as the book progresses, emphasises the mobility propensity for three cohorts of geographically and socially peripheral students in Portugal, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Cairns has analysed this largely through a sociological and socio-geographical lens but has critically engaged with the geographical student mobility literature to draw together and problematise this complex, and often unwieldy, raft of work which cuts across multiple social and spatial scales. Cairns' well-crafted critique deftly identifies some crucial gaps in the literature - the Erasmus programme and post-graduate mobility spring to mind - providing many opportunities to further enliven this field of

research. I felt that Cairns maintained his focus on students 'being mobile' at the beginning of the book, however, I found myself questioning the 'being' element later on during the analysis sections when Cairns started to discuss future mobility decisions. This left me wondering whether the book was more focused upon *considering* mobility than the *actual* mobility itself.

To unpack student mobilities, Cairns employs his own theoretical framework of 'spatial reflexivity' (Cairns, Growiec and Smyth, 2012). This is defined as a recognition of "the importance of geographical movement and acting upon this realisation" (Cairns, 2014, p. 28), yet of the two key components of this conceptualisation (mobility decision-making and the reality of *being* mobile), Cairns' analysis is focused primarily upon the decision-making aspect of such transitions. In a nutshell, Cairns argues that "spatial reflexivity is more about choosing a life rather than selecting a lifestyle" (Cairns, 2014, p. 28), hence such reflexivity acknowledges the complexity of youthful aspirations rather than suggesting that youth transitions are fixed. What is particularly novel about this deployment of spatial reflexivity is the way in which it exposes young people's propensity to perceive lifestyle improvements in the face of social, economic and political disarray. Cairns' respondents have clearly considered their agency, not just in how they might approach university, but also how they build their qualifications and experiences into their future career pathways, and the important role that mobility plays in developing such trajectories.

Nevertheless, I felt that solely focusing upon future mobility plans could be viewed as being speculative, particularly as the respondents' views are couched in discourses of austerity and political instability making them potentially spatially and temporally loaded. I read this book soon after conducting individual personal development plan meetings with my own second year tutees. Tellingly, each student had factored 'probably', 'possibly' or 'maybe' living and/or working abroad into their own future career trajectories. Yet, when

pressed, my students all admitted to these ideas being largely hypothetical and were tied into more general discourses of youth mobilities expectations.

Other studies of international student mobility (e.g. Brooks and Waters, 2009; Collins, 2010) which offer more concretised accounts of the outcome of *actual* mobility highlight the intricacies of youth migration. Holdsworth (2005), for example, problematises the delayed transitions of Spanish graduates from the family home suggesting that economic and social pressures have changed cultural norms and values tied into how families are perceived. Likewise, Sage, Evandrou and Falkingham's (2013) discussions of post-student mobilities uncover a perceptible 'double-boomerang' effect in which graduates may return to the family home much later in life due to financial, employment or relationship problems. Hence, I felt I was left slightly wanting an *outcome* of Cairns' students' mobilities. Nevertheless, Cairns' final examination of institutionalised mobility was a particular stand out for me. His deft précis of the EU policy initiatives to increase inter-country student mobility was sharp and on-point, concluding that it would be near suicide for Governments to initiate 'brain drains' from their own countries meaning the more implicit youth mobilities currently implemented are likely to remain in place for now.

This critique of HE policy segues neatly into Van Mol's study of student mobility. In contrast to Cairns' student mobility perceptions, *Intra-European Student Mobility in International Higher Education Circuits: Europe on the Move* interrogates the mobility itself, unpacking, in detail, the factors which constitute intra-European student mobility. He identifies a key gap which is present in many contemporary youth mobility studies (e.g. Findlay, 2011), arguing that categorising international students as one homogenous group misses the complexity of intra-continental mobility. The book's primary contribution is its critical examination of the objectives of the Erasmus scheme to facilitate contact between young Europeans and to promote future mobility post-university. In providing a distinction between degree mobility (common in international student mobility) and credit mobility

(common in European student mobility), Van Mol skilfully unpicks Erasmus students from the umbrella of the international cohort, giving them a distinct identity which has not necessarily been portrayed in other studies. Consequently, while Van Mol admits that it is not entirely clear what causes mobility, his analysis works hard at unpacking some of the influencing factors.

With regard to the sample, Van Mol acknowledges Europe's deeply stratified tertiary education system (e.g. varying trends for students' access to HE and a wide variety of political, social and economic influences to HE structures), selecting institutions in several geographically dispersed case-countries - Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, Italy, Norway and Poland - within which to study. Crucially though, Van Mol offers no critique of the selection of these institutions. It could therefore be suggested that as these six institutions fall inside the top 400 universities in the world rankings (Times Higher Education [THE], 2014) the likelihood of them each containing students with access to mobility capital may be much higher than those from institutions lower down the rankings (see Brooks and Waters, 2009).

While Van Mol's study is not specifically geographical, his analysis, like Cairns', contains a strong undercurrent of spatiality. He considers a variety of spatial and socio-spatial scales, weaving together a clever narrative which questions his respondents' interwoven national, European and mobile identities while on the move. Considering such individual agency is an important step forward in student mobilities research as it attempts to address some of the issues raised by previous studies (e.g. Lindberg, 2009; King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003) which have struggled to make sense of the myriad of contrasting HE systems in Europe for migratory students. To counter this, Van Mol frames his conceptualisation of student mobility as "forming part of the 'do-it-yourself' or 'elective' biographies of young adults" (p. 31). While this can be hard to consider in the context of the complex, multiple and risky choices on offer to [im]mobile students which has been born out of neoliberalisation, Van

Mol deals with this by acknowledging the individualisation of the life course in transition as well as how those in transition might be directly affected by their mobility.

In conclusion, while each of these texts offer some excellent additions to the student mobility canon, in my view they are most usefully read in tandem in order to problematise youth transitions. In doing so, this provides an opportunity to read more critically into the balance between a *propensity* to be mobile and the *mobility* itself (albeit in a short-term context) which is so often missing from research.

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