

Fire as a Metaphor of (Im)Mobility

BÜLENT DIKEN

Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT *The article deals with fire as a metaphor of radical socio-political change, focusing on the paradoxical relationship between mobility and immobility. It opens with a topological discussion where fire signifies an instance of 'absolute immobility', or, politically speaking, the 'emergency break' of the empty, chronological time. There is, however, a pharmakon-like, aporetic dimension to fire. The article articulates this dimension in the context of nihilism, linking this to the sociology of mobility.*

KEY WORDS: Topology; body without organs; revolution; separation; radical nihilism; passive nihilism; sociology of mobility

Introduction

There is no monster hidden in the abyss, there is only fire. (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 78)

It is not possible, as Urry (2000, pp. 21–48) argues, to think sociologically without metaphors and this applies to the sociology of mobility as well. In this context Eyjafjallajökull's eruption offers an opportunity to rethink fire as a metaphor of (im)mobility. This, of course, does not mean denying the empirical, non-metaphorical aspects of the explosion and its practical and impractical implications. The point here is, rather, to revisit the metaphor of fire, fire as a metaphor, and ask whether it is useful to illuminate the paradoxical relationship between mobility and immobility.

Fire Topology

Different social topologies are performed by different kinds of objects (Law, 2000, p. 4). Thus, as Latour shows, networking necessitates objects that can move (mobility) yet retain their shape in movement (immutability). An e-mail, for instance, is mobile yet can preserve its form while it is mobile. As such, 'immutable mobiles' enable 'translation without corruption', a capacity without which the network space cannot

Correspondence Address: Bülent Diken, Department of Sociology, County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK. Tel.: +44 (0)1524 594178; Email: b.diken@lancaster.ac.uk

1745-0101 Print/1745-011X Online/11/010095-08 © 2011 Taylor & Francis

DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2011.532657

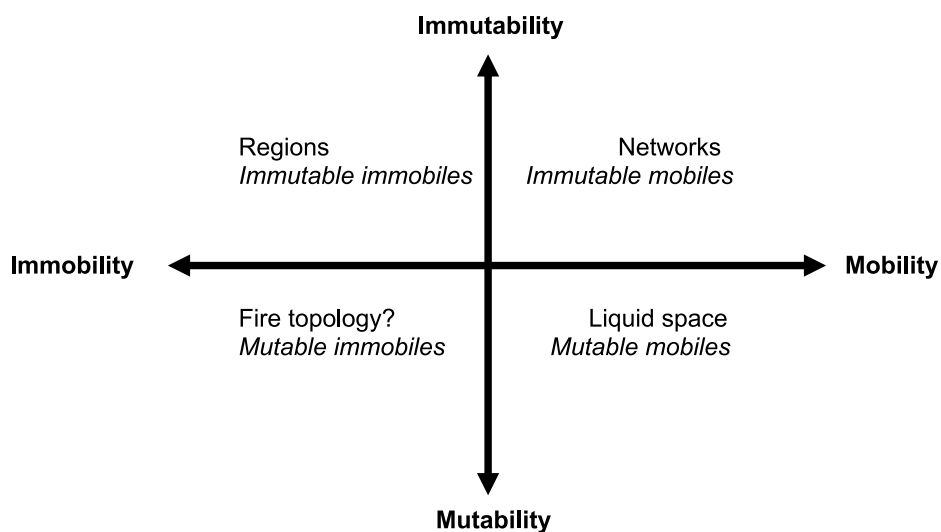


Figure 1. Four kinds of objects, four social topologies.

be performed (Latour, 1990, pp. 27–32). But following this logic we can also speak of immutable immobiles, mutable mobiles, and mutable immobiles, an idea mapped by Figure 1.

On this account, ‘regions’ constitute a striated, Cartesian geographical space with demarcated zones and co-ordinates. It is the topography of the social in terms of differentiated regions, e.g. structures, systems, or fields based on territorialized and non-transformable objects. In ‘networks’, which imply another form of materiality and spatiality, social relations are disembedded from ‘regions’ and extend over time and space. Network space is an effect of social practices framed by ‘immutable mobiles’ (Latour, 1987; Law & Mol, 2000). The third topology is related to ‘fluids’ or ‘flows’: material in movement and under transformation simultaneously. Here objects are mobile but also keep changing their forms as they move (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Law and Mol, 2000).

Regarding the fourth topology, one suggestion comes from Law and Mol: a ‘fire topology’. Whereas the fluid refers to flows, fire is a metaphor of ‘passion, action, energy, spirit, will and anger, not to mention creative destruction and sexuality’ (Law & Mol, 2000, p. 7). Significantly, however, for Law and Mol, fire stands for another form of mobility characterized by ‘abrupt and discontinuous *movements*’ (Law & Mol, 2000, p. 7, author’s emphasis). What I would like to emphasize instead is the dimension of immobility as well as mutability in relation to fire. Thus in Figure 1 fire refers to (mutable) immobility.

To discuss this, let us turn to two theorists of mobility, Deleuze and Guattari. As is well known, in their ontology of becoming, everything is in movement. Everything is a mobile and hybrid (mutable) network, or ‘assemblage’, a process of interaction and connection between heterogeneous elements. What is significant, however, is that assemblages face two tendencies at once: organization and disorganization. In so far as they constitute the relations that result in stratification, assemblages are part of the strata, that is, of actual, extensive reality. But on the other side assemblages face

‘something else, the body without organs’, which causes disorganization and disarticulation to the strata (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 40). The ‘body without organs’ is, like Spinoza’s monist substance, an all-encompassing flux, a mutable chaos, from which everything emerges and to which everything eternally returns. As such, the body without organs is a concept that refers to ‘absolute immobility’, to absolute disorganization of ‘organs’/assemblages.

In other words, what is at play in this mobile ontology is a dialectic of organization and disorganization, connection and disconnection, stratification and de-stratification, at once. This is also why ‘de-territorialization’, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not reducible to physical linear movement but refers, above all, to disorganization, to a deviation from the strata, through a link to the body without organs. Therefore, at the heart of the production of the assemblages, which create the strata, we also find a tendency of anti-production; at the heart of a mobile ontology, we meet immobility: assemblages ‘work only when they break down, and continually by breaking down’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 8). Crucially, such immobility is not merely a supplement to mobility (e.g. the airport as the immobile support of mobility), or even a paradoxical consequence of mobility (e.g. sitting motionless during a flight). Rather, the point is that every mobile assemblage necessarily exhibits a relation to a body without organs, to ‘an immobile motor’ (p. 141).

Concomitantly, ‘becoming a body without organs’ is the highest ethical, political and social ideal for Deleuze and Guattari. It is not the empirical mobility of social assemblages as such but their breaking down, relating to the domain of the virtual, their reaching the level of an ‘absolute immobility’, that creates the new. The new, or what they call the ‘line of flight’, is always linked to, a relation to a body without organs; it always emerges as a subtraction from, as a *disorganization* of the strata. Which is also what ‘revolution’ means to Deleuze: linking society to its body without organs, to its ‘immobile motor’, by means of which ‘the faculty of sociability is raised to its transcendent exercise and breaks the unity of the fetishistic common sense’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 208). This idea brings to mind Benjamin’s (1999) earlier reflections on modern history as a linear mobility, as a case of captivity, and on the possibility of escaping this linearity.

Immobility as Cheerful Separation

In so far as mobility is understood as a linear movement from one point to another, being stranded in between two points is a strange experience of abandonment. To be sure, many passengers who were stranded during Eyjafjallajökull’s eruption first felt an intense anxiety following disturbing experiences (such as the flight cancellations). Nevertheless, this was often followed by another, equally intense feeling of abandonment: waiting and waiting, and waiting, unable either to move on, ‘connect’ further, nor to ‘disconnect’ from the trajectory by which one is captivated. Such abandonment is of course the essential experience of boredom, in which surroundings become indifferent to us, while at the same time, having no possibility of action, we cannot free ourselves from them (see Agamben, 2004, p. 64).

What makes such boredom significant is that it reveals a strange proximity of human to animal: just as an animal cannot break off its relationship to the environment, the bored/stranded person is confronted with captivation in relation to their surroundings.

Seen in this perspective, precisely at the point at which we think mobility makes us free, being stranded exposes our relationship to mobility as a relationship based on captivation, an experience, which visits us every time technologies of mobility break down. The essence of mobility transpires in an experience of immobility. Precisely as such, however, this very proximity paradoxically opens up a possibility for the human to distance itself from the animal. If the animal is defined by the impossibility of breaking down its relation to its environment, the human, in turn, is human *because* it can non-relate to and transcend its captivation; it can overcome itself (pp. 67–69).

But how can one make sense of this at a sociological level? As is well known, Benjamin depicts the indistinct flow of chronological, ‘empty’ time as a catastrophe: history as a pile of pseudo-events. Hence modernity, understood as mobility and progress, is a mobile hell, the ideal of which is bare repetition, the eternal recurrence of the same non-events which produce no difference. In turn, ‘revolution’ to Benjamin (1999, pp. 252–254) is the ‘emergency break’ of history, which makes it possible to arrest the indistinct flow, to break free from the historicist conformism. Historicism cannot grasp revolutionary events because it is preoccupied with determining causal, spatial and temporal, relations between different chronological moments. But the time of revolution is never chronological time. Revolution is an event in which ‘time stands still and has come to a stop’ (p. 254). The time of revolution is the ‘messianic’ time, not in the sense of eschatological time, as the ‘last day’ in which time ends, but in the sense of an ‘operational’ time internal to chronology, transforming it from within:

Whereas our representation of chronological time, as the time *in which* we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves – spectators who look at the time that flies without any time left, continually missing themselves – messianic time, an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time, is the time *that* we ourselves are, and for this very reason, is the only real time, the only time we have. (Agamben, 2005, p. 68, emphasis orig.)

This messianic time, *kairos*, is a ‘seized’ *chronos*, the time in which ‘man’ autonomously seizes the moment, ‘chooses his own freedom’, in opposition to chronological time (Agamben, 2005, p. 69; 2007, p. 115). If official history is the history of the winners, the silenced past of the oppressed carries within it another temporality, a link between past and present events, by which history is referred to redemption. And only redemption can make the ‘fullness’ of the past possible, can ‘fill’ time by linking the present to the whole of the past (Benjamin, 1999, p. 245). Redemption, revolution, is a ‘leap into the past’, an act of tearing ‘the past from its context, destroying it, in order to return it, transfigured, to its origin’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 152; Benjamin, 1999, pp. 253–255). Thus, if history repeats itself as farce, if in pseudo-history the tragic reappears as comedy, this is not necessarily a reason for melancholic detachment but rather an occasion for a joyful separation – history has this course ‘so that humanity should part with its past *cheerfully*’ (Marx, 1975, p. 179; see also Agamben, 1999, p. 154). ‘Happiness’ is a joyful separation from pseudo-history, from pseudo-mobility. Fire, the volcanic eruption, constitutes an opportunity for such a separation.

Fire and the Crowd

There is, in this respect, an interesting historical correlation between ‘revolution’ and fire. The French Revolution, for instance, was seen ‘as something like an erupting volcano’ (Robespierre, 2007, p. 59). But if social catastrophes (revolution) were historically likened to natural catastrophes (volcanic eruption), the fear of revolution, too, expressed itself by making intensive use of fire as a metaphor for the ultimate threat: the dissolution of the social. Thus, towards the end of *The Devils*, Dostoevsky’s terrorist/devil, Verkhovensky, modeled on Bakunin’s anarchist friend Nechayev, sets the whole town on fire, aiming at ‘the systematic destruction of society and the principles on which it is based, with the object of ... bringing about a state of general confusion: so that when society – sick, depressed, cynical, and godless, though with an intense yearning for some guiding idea and for self-preservation – had been brought to a point of collapse, [we] could suddenly seize power, raising the banner of revolt...’ (Dostoevsky, 1971, pp. 661–662).

Moreover, the fear of fire often coincides with the fear of the crowd: ‘It is strange to observe how strongly ... the crowd assumes the character of fire’ (Canetti, 1962, p. 27). The crowd, like fire, is an impressive means of destruction, it grows as it spreads, destroys everything hostile and it annihilates ‘irrevocably’ – nothing after it remains as it was before (p. 20). Spite, the willingness to harm oneself in order to harm the other, is therefore a key to understand crowd behaviour. As Le Bon (2002, p. 28) formulates it, self-interest is ‘very rarely a powerful motive force with crowds’. Nevertheless, neither spite nor fire can be delimited to the crowd. Let us turn, at this point, to Melville’s *Moby Dick*:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (Melville, 1998, p. 339)

This is how Melville’s narrator, Ishmael, describes the impossibility of describing Moby Dick. The nonhuman whale, in all its ‘white’ indifference and indefiniteness, is a mobile monster, a ‘Leviathan’. Thus it is sublimated as an unspeaking, silent God with no face, with no promise of meaning. An already dead God, which therefore cannot be killed: hence, in as much as Ishmael, the narrator, cannot describe Moby Dick, Ahab, ‘chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world’, cannot kill it (Melville, 1998, pp. 167, 175, 310). With Ahab, Job’s biblical rebellion receives a modern twist, that is, becomes a rebellion against modern alienation which is personified in Moby Dick: an atheist god, which is not a god, a god fit for a time in which ‘God is dead’; nevertheless a monster, which constrains freedom and thus provokes revolt (see Friedman, 1963, pp. 398–399).

As such, Melville’s Moby Dick is a metaphor of the ‘absurd’, Camus’s concept born of the contradiction between the human ‘longing for happiness’ and alienation (Camus, 2005, p. 26). And in so far as revolt is understood as ‘redemption’ from absurdity, in case of such an attempt, there is always a potential danger that lies in wait. The

desire for revolution can release itself in a ‘foolish’ way, through nihilistic revenge: one concludes that ‘everything deserves to pass away’ (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 162). Ahab, for instance, in his delirious revolt against Moby Dick, is devastated by his own hatred, which transforms him into a tragic hero who will risk everything to kill Moby Dick, including his ship and its crew, is his desire for revenge – ‘the one and only and all-engrossing object of hunting the White Whale’ (Melville, 1998, p. 167). Ahab is prepared, ‘for hate’s sake’, to spit his ‘last breath’ at the whale (p. 507). No wonder, his passion for revenge, ‘the hot fire of his purpose’ to which he sacrifices ‘all mortal interests’, destroys Ahab himself before Moby Dick (p. 189).

What is at issue here is the ambivalence of ‘fire’. Fire signifies a search for, a bond with truth and this is Ahab the rebel’s Promethean aspect as a worshipper of fire. But one can ‘burn’ with fire as well as ‘leap’ with it (p. 450). Thus, fire, initially the symbol of hope in *Moby Dick*, turns into a symbol of lack of hope, gradually giving rise to a paranoid closure. It destroys the ship that feeds and transports Ahab and his men. ‘Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee ... There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness’ (p. 380).

Play with Fire

The pharmakon-like, dual nature of fire moves it ‘beyond good and evil’: the poison and the remedy cannot be separated from each other. With Deleuze, the line of flight always has the potential danger of turning into a micro-fascist, (self)destructive line of death. Or, with Badiou, the passion for the Real, indispensable to every act of ‘subtraction’ from power relations, can be trapped into a desire for purification, which leads to a nihilist destruction for ‘at the end of its purification, the real, as total absence of reality, is the nothing’ (Badiou, 2007, p. 64). So if all creativity necessitates ‘fire’, violence towards what exists, playing with fire always implies a potential for calamity.

Then, it is necessary to insist on an aporia in relation to fire: as an event that intervenes into the course of time and space to change it, any experiment with fire involves a radical contingency, an aporetic moment, precisely because it cannot provide a definitive measure of its violence. In the lack of a calculus, all leap, all flight is potentially open to becoming self-destructive. Hence it is impossible to draw an absolute line between productive and unproductive, creative and destructive ash cloud disruptions.

And since there can be no abstract aporia, this aporia, too, can only be lived out. Therefore, from the perspective of the actual, the event/fire is necessarily an excess that introduces an irrational, ‘impossible’ element into the given world (cf. Žižek, 1992, p. 44). Only when a new framework is re-established the ‘transgressive’ event retroactively grounds itself and assumes a positive, determinate character. For this to happen, however, the initial violence is unavoidable for ‘there is none the less something inherently “terroristic” in every authentic act, in its gesture of thoroughly redefining the “rules of the game,” inclusive of the very basic self-identity of its perpetrator’ (Žižek, 1999, pp. 377–378). Experimentation with fire is deprived of ‘any guarantee in the big Other’ (p. 380). There can be no pre-existing, objective (actual) criteria to account for the intervention of the fire-event/act.

The Devil without Fire, Sociology of Mobility without Immobility

But there is a second danger in playing with fire: realizing that fire has dangers one can choose to become a passive spectator. This is the case with Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, who answers Ahab's radical nihilism with passive nihilism. If Ahab is ready to sacrifice actual existence for the sake of touching the virtual, Ishmael is willing to sacrifice the virtual, the metaphysical dimension of existence, to be able to open up a space for himself in the actual. Thus, he perceives that his own individuality is merged in shared sociality on the ship, in society, and on this basis he can develop a critique of Ahab's spiteful line of action (Melville, 1998, p. 287). He is right on one point: although it cannot be reduced to its actual circumstances, the event can 'express' itself through the actual. That is, the actual is necessary for any experiment with the virtual, with fire; the event cannot take place *ex-nihilo*.

Yet Ishmael, the only member of the crew who returns to the land alive, 'does not offer an alternative point of view to Ahab nor succeed in the quest for truth where Ahab fails' (Friedman, 1963, p. 91). For Ishmael, like Nietzsche's 'last man', time is an empty movement just as life is a pointless process. And this lack of perspective is also a lack of will. After all, interpretation, the ability to construct a perspective requires a subjectivity that can evaluate as well as perceive things in a contemplative manner. That is, interpretation is an ability to find, to create meaning or values (Hass, 1982, p. 197). Yet, Ishmael is not able to make this leap. Hence, just as Ahab devalues the actual world, Ishmael devalues values as such. They say *no* to life in their different but equally life-negating ways. Ahab's leap leads him to the annihilation of the actual, to (self)destruction, Ishmael's inability to risk such a leap condemns him to the actual, to passivity:

I repeat, moderate your demands, don't demand all that is 'great and beautiful' of me, and we shall live in peace and harmony, you'll see. (Dostoevsky, 2004, p. 647)

This is the devil we meet towards the end of *Brothers Karamazov*, announcing the ludicrousness of sublimation, of 'all that is great and beautiful,' in modern times, and demanding moderation: a banal, normalized devil that no longer appears in 'red glow', a devil without fire. Indeed, ours is a society that has turned moderation into an even more straightforward injunction. Hence our obsession with 'a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol...' (Žižek, 2002, p. 10). In the era of decaffeinated reality, even radical thought risks losing its 'malignant' substance. Thus, we are familiar with a 'Marx without revolution', a 'Benjamin without the leap', a 'Deleuze without the body without organs', and so on, as figures of normality at today's universities. This perhaps also explains why the sociology of mobility is in general focused on 'regions', 'networks' and, occasionally, 'fluids', while it apparently finds it difficult to count to four, to take the topology of fire – the structural role of immobility in relation to mobility – as seriously as the other three topologies, often reducing mobility to physical mobility. A sociology of mobility, which is blind to fire, the 'immobile motor' of all mobility.

Corbusier, the architect of mobility, insisted that the twentieth-century city should be seen from the car, that modern life should be reformed with respect to one criterion: mobility. In a sense, therefore, for Corbusier architecture *is* mobility. On account of which one of his book titles becomes even more interesting: *Architecture Or Revolution*. Mobility Or... It is *this* Eyjafjallajökull forces us to rethink a century after Corbusier. Before Corbusier's time, people still likened social catastrophes to natural catastrophes. Today, in a world in which capitalism appears to have become a second nature, in a world in which people can imagine the end of the world but not that of capitalism (see Žižek, 2009, p. 78), we liken natural catastrophes to social catastrophes, trying to calculate how much Eyjafjallajökull cost the airlines, how much disruption it caused, and so on. What does it mean in relation to mobility? What does it tell about us?

References

- Agamben, G. (1999) *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Agamben, G. (2004) *The Open. Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Agamben, G. (2005) *The Time That Remains* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Agamben, G. (2007) *Infancy and History* (London: Verso).
- Badiou, A. (2007) *The Century* (London: Polity).
- Benjamin, W. (1999) *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico).
- Camus, A. (2005) *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin).
- Canetti, E. (1962) *Crowds and Power* (London: Phoenix).
- Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference & Repetition* (London: The Athlone Press).
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari F. (1983) *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia II* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press).
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari F. (1994) *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso).
- Dostoevsky, F. (2004) *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Vintage).
- Friedman, M. (1963) *Problematic Rebel. An Image of Modern Man* (New York: Random House).
- Hass, J. (1982) *Illusionens filosofi. Studier i Nietzsches firser manuskripter* [Philosophy of Illusion. Studies in Nietzsche's Eighties Manuscripts] (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag).
- Houellebecq, M. (2005) *The Possibility of an Island* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
- Latour, B. (1987) *Science in Action. How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press).
- Latour, B. (1990) Drawing Things Together, in: M. Lynch & S. Woolgar (Eds) *Representation in Scientific Practice*, pp. 19–68 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Law, J. (2000) Objects, Spaces, Others (draft). Department of Sociology, Lancaster University. Available at <http://www.comp.lancaster.ac.uk/sociology/soc027jl.html> (accessed 18 October 2010).
- Law, J. & Mol, A. M. (2000) Situating Technoscience: an Inquiry into Spatialities. Available at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/papers/law-mol-situating-technoscience.pdf> (accessed 18 October 2010).
- Le Bon, G. (2002) *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Dover).
- Marx, K.. (1975) Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction, in: *Karl Marx. Frederick Engels. Collected Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 175–187 (London: Lawrence & Wishart).
- Melville, H. (1998) *Moby Dick* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics).
- Nietzsche, F. (1961) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin).
- Robespierre, M. (2007) *Virtue and Terror*, S. Žižek (Ed.) (London: Verso).
- Urry, J. (2000) *Sociology Beyond Societies* (London: Routledge).
- Žižek, S. (1992) *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (London: Routledge).
- Žižek, S. (1999) *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso).
- Žižek, S. (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso).
- Žižek, S. (2009) *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso).

Copyright of Mobilities is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.