

From (E)Migration to Mobile Lifestyles: Ethnographic and Conceptual Reflections about Mobilities and Migration*

by ALDINA CAMENISCH and SERAINA MÜLLER
(University of Basel)

Abstract

Departing from on-going fieldwork in China and Northern Europe among Swiss nationals, the aim of this article is to contribute towards clarification of the often somewhat unreflected use of concepts within the 'migration-mobility continuum.' We sketch a mobilities-informed and data-grounded ethnographic research approach and investigate the various forms, meanings and outcomes of mobility and migration throughout three life stories. In conclusion, we argue for an empirically grounded, sophisticated usage of theoretical frameworks and concepts, and we discuss how this can contribute to a more critical, differentiated research about mobility and migration.

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Keywords: skilled migration, mobilities, migration trajectories, theoretical frameworks, migration terminology, ethnography, life stories, regimes of mobility, China, Northern Europe

Introduction

Departing from ongoing fieldwork in China and Northern Europe among Swiss nationals, the aim of this article is to refine our research approach and to analyse life stories of three interview partners.¹ On this basis, our article seeks to contribute towards clarifying of the often somewhat unreflected use of concepts within the 'migration-mobility continuum.'

This analytical interest was piqued by two related constellations:

* This is a co-authored paper to which each author has equally contributed.

¹ Our research project "The Swiss abroad" consists of two ethnographic case studies on Swiss migrants living in Northern Europe (Seraina Müller) and Mainland China (Aldina Camenisch). The three portraits presented in this article form thus part of larger sets of data with 33 interview partners in Mainland China and 35 in Northern Europe that we collected during over two years of extensive fieldwork in our respective fields.

Our initial research focus is on how contemporary forms of (e)migration are unfolding and experienced by Swiss people living in Northern Europe and Mainland China. This may initially look like a potentially methodological nationalist conceptualization of migration, dealing with one-way movements from one 'nation container' (Switzerland) to others (Northern European countries and China). Keeping the powerful role of migration-mobility research in mind, and its capacity to create or perpetuate ways of perceiving social reality, we thus unpack the assumptions that prefigure research in migration and mobilities, and then we revisit our own approach.

Secondly, our research deals with rather privileged, skilled and frictionless forms of migration. Our respondents hardly describe themselves as 'migrants.' Rather, by resorting to a vocabulary of flexibility and mobility, they present their experience as somehow different from what they understand as migration. Hence, we reflect how

to approach these ‘daily language’ conceptualizations and how to link them with slightly different and potentially more nuanced meaning(s) of the same terms in scientific discourse.

The first part of this article explores the field of the ‘migration-mobility continuum.’ Theoretically and methodologically, we sketch an approach to mobilities-informed, ethnographic migration research. In the following section, we investigate the various forms, meanings and outcomes of mobility throughout a life story. In conclusion, we argue for a well-reflected, nuanced and data-grounded usage of theoretical frameworks and concepts.

Coping with uneasy labels and blurring conceptual borders in the field(s) of migration and mobilities

Clarifying the migration-mobilities continuum

The International Organization for Migration defines a migrant broadly as

“any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.”²

Research about migration emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of the global political system of nation-states that “set and control the parameters of (transnational) movements and prefer relatively immobilized populations” (Salazar and Smart, 2011, iii). Therefore, and despite the broader actual meaning of the term, the focus of early migration studies was to concentrate on human movements between ‘nation containers,’ treating them as potentially problematic. To this day, studies mostly investigate cross-border migration and often focus on how those seemingly different migrant ‘others’ can be incorporated into the host society (Söderström et al. 2013, 8). Migration studies have thus

been reproducing categories of and assumptions about ‘foreigners’ and ‘migrants’ created by the “nation-state migration apparatus” (Dahinden 2015, 2207).

However, this state-centred, problematizing perspective has been challenged by various scholars who aim for a more reflective and critical approach to migration. Their contributions shift the gaze away from the ‘nation container’ and also investigate assumptions of the migration apparatuses in itself. Thus, writings about transnationalism (e. g. Glick Schiller et. al 1995; Portes 1997) provide a major impetus for revisiting migration research by delineating how migrants engage in social fields and negotiations of belonging that are rooted in two or more nation states. Other substantial criticism addressed methodological nationalism (Beck and Grande 2010; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and the ethnic lens (Glick Schiller et al. 2006).

Additionally, Sheller and Urry have launched the mobilities turn to shift the focus of social sciences as a whole towards the fluid and moving rather than the fixed and sedentary. They call for an interdisciplinary and crosslinked “socio-technical” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 211) study of all sorts of movements of people, material and information as well as of infrastructures, powers, discourses and spaces that channel, link, facilitate or block those movements.

The mobility lens thus reverses the assumption of social sciences that stasis is normal and movement exceptional and potentially problematic. Furthermore, in contrast to traditional migration research focusing mostly on movement between states, mobility is more comprehensive and multi-scalar, mainly concerned with the “process of movement” of “people, objects, or ideas” (Söderström et al. 2013, 5).

Salazar (2016, 2) summarizes the complex ‘new mobilities’ discourse postulating that it is partly shaped by (neo-) capitalist ideologies, transported by way of favourable images of globalisation and “links mobility to three positively valued characteristics: (1) the ability to move, (2) the ease of freedom of movement, (3) the

² <http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>, accessed January 26, 2017.

tendency to change easily or quickly.” Hence, change through mobility is broadly perceived as bringing about positive outcomes.

As a result, the mobilities discourse has increasingly been adapted in migration studies.

While migration research often focuses on forced and illegalized forms, migration is actually much more diverse. There has been a rising number of studies about migration of elites since the 1990s (Koser and Salt 1997; Beaverstock 2002; Sklair 2000; Yeoh and Huang 2011) which have been complemented with more recent research about migrants positioned somewhere between the lowest and highest echelons of social orders (Amit 2007; Conradson and Latham 2005; Benson and O’Reilly 2009). These forms of migration are often described with terms that either specify the nouns “migrant” or “migration” with an additional, often ‘positive’ word (such as “talent,” “(highly) skilled,” “elite,” or “lifestyle”), or with expressions (e.g. “middling transnationals,” or “expatriates”) that replace “migration” altogether. In a similar vein, migratory movements of these groups are often coined as “mobility.”³ As Dahinden (2015, 2221) points out, this use of “mobility is often juxtaposed with migration. Mobility (within the EU, of highly skilled individuals) is desired, while migration is undesired and problematic.” This ‘avoidance’ of migration terminology in research about rather privileged migratory movements may thus derive from an intention to mark them as somehow different from the often-negative connotations associated with “migration.”

Another recent trend is to apply a mobilities lens in research associated with precarious and illegalized migratory movements (Moret 2016; Schapendonk and Steel 2014). Here, the aim is to overcome the migration apparatus and to show such forms of migration in new light.

We agree that mobility studies can help tackle dilemmas in migration research. It broadens the still somewhat static and state-focused gaze of migration studies and adds considerations about

all sorts of economic, political and social fluidities, fixities, and the diversity of human movement to the agenda of those who study human migration. However, we argue that simply replacing “migration” with at first sight less problematic and more positive “mobilities” categories may take the underlying assumptions of both terminologies for granted, thus unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes.

On the other hand, (anthropological) migration scholarship has introduced concepts, critiques and methodologies, e.g. multi-sited (Marcus 1998) or itinerant (Schein 2002) ethnography, that have been adopted by mobilities researchers. Furthermore, to investigate relevant mobility patterns through the lens of migration studies offers the possibility to review the liquid conditions of “the assumed mobile world” (Fortier 2014, 65) and the power relations involved in peoples’ mobile life(styles). Thus, we understand migration studies as a way of focusing the somewhat hard-to-grasp (Adey 2006) and metaphorical rather than empirically reflected (Favell 2001) ‘new mobilities’ paradigm.

In this sense, we argue, along with other colleagues (Hui 2016; Moret 2016), for a cross-fertilizing analytical stance. We suggest a mobilities-informed migration approach with the following three key components:

Firstly, the traditional understanding of migration needs to be broadened by investigating how migratory movements are embedded in more comprehensive, multi-scalar themes of mobility. Such a focus is more extensive and captures, for instance, geographical and social mobility and how they may precede, intersect with, and shape trajectories of internal and international migration. More generally, we suggest to address migration as a process and to contextualise it in its temporal dimension. Points of reference for such an approach provide writings on lifestyle migration (e.g. Benson and O’Reilly 2009; 2016; Benson and Osbaldiston 2016) with its emphasis on migration pre- and post-phases, Knowles (2010; 2012) and Schapendonk et al. (2014) suggests to understand migration as “journeys” as

³ For example, as conceptualised by Favell 2008 or Kennedy 2010.

well as studies that have employed a life course approach to migration trajectories (e.g. Bailey and Mulder 2017; Kou and Bailey 2014; Moret 2016).

A second central concern is the aim of “tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 211) and to address “questions of inequality, domination and constraints” (Söderström et al. 2013, 6). “Politics” and “regimes” of mobility are helpful concepts in this regard: Cresswell (2010, 21) traces “politics of mobility” and demonstrates that human movements are happening within “social relations that involve the production and distribution of power.” From a macro-level perspective, Glick-Schiller and Salazar (2013) postulate a mobility regimes framework. Hereby, “the term ‘regime’ calls attention to the role both of individual states and of changing international regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility.” (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189) The aim is to discover what we “see if we do not think about mobility like a nation-state” (ibid., 193). As a result, states are no longer hidden, naturalising apparatuses but rather exposed as powerful actors (Söderström et al. 2013, 11).

Thirdly, another, related requirement for nuanced mobilities-informed migration research is a critical reflection of epistemological and historical contexts of and a differentiation between ‘common-sense’ and ‘analytical’ categories. Once detected, “(...) these common-sense categories and the social realities they help constitute, are part of our object of study and should be investigated by using analytical categories” (Dahinden 2015, 2214).

Methodological ways out

A mobilities-informed research requires a correspondent methodological approach. We suggest a reflexive, data-grounded methodology based on ethnographic fieldwork. An (anthropological) approach to mobility and migration starts with the questions of how migratory movements are experienced by the people studied and how concepts are construed in this context rather than

letting a predefined conceptual setting determine the analysis.

Along with other studies that have applied a similar, ethnographic approach (for example Benson 2011, Moret 2016, Schapendonk 2015), Kalir’s study “Moving Subjects, Stagnant Paradigms” is exemplary for the approach we suggest. Kalir looks “at regimes of mobility from the eyes of those involved (...)” (Kalir 2013, 312). Accordingly, he provides an account of how various forms of mobility and stasis interact with internal and international migratory moves of his respondent and “the ways in which a powerfully global, neo-liberal economic and political regime moulds the spatial strategies of individuals (...)” (ibid., 312)

In our own research, we investigate trajectories and experiences of the ‘Swiss abroad’ in life story interviews⁴ in which our respondents tell their trajectory in a self-guided way. Thereby, various forms of mobilities and moorings, crucial experiences, themes and the meanings attached to them become visible as the life story unfolds. As a result, as we carve out wider discursive, political and economic constellations that structure our respondents’ trajectories and perceptions, we capture their common-sense understanding of categories and are able to link them to scientific concepts.

Investigating three life stories with a mobility-informed migration lens

The following section introduces the three life stories of Boris, Veronika and Ricardo. We then analyse their trajectories by applying the previously outlined approach. Thus, the presented stories and analytical insights serve to illustrate general findings of our research.

Boris

Boris (age thirty), living in a major city in the Pearl River Delta, was born to a Swiss family and

⁴ Our approach is based on Atkinson (2002, 122): “In a life story interview, the interviewee is a story teller, the narrator of the story of his or her own life; the interviewer is a guide, or director, in this process.”

raised and educated in the German speaking part of Switzerland. He first gained a vocational diploma in computer science, then went on to study management and concurrently had been running a variety of small entrepreneurial businesses since he was a teenager.

Boris's father worked for the former Swiss national airline Swissair, so even at a young age, he was accustomed to traveling often. "I like traveling. (...) I flew around all my life. (...) I have always been quite internationally-minded."

After a previous exchange year in the US, Boris came to China for the first time in 2007 for a one-year internship. He developed an interest in the country because of its fast-developing economy and perceived different culture. By exposing himself to this unfamiliar environment, he intended to broaden his horizon: "I knew it will improve my personality, to get along better with people that are very different. (...) That is a way to develop myself and to get to know the country." On the other hand, he had been to Asia before: "Well, I had been to the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. I know how Asia is. I thought, the Chinese cannot be very different."

During this year, he found China to be an inspiring and welcoming environment in social and cultural terms, and also a promising market for young entrepreneurs. Accordingly, he soon established a social network among Chinese people, started to learn Chinese, and kept his eyes open for business opportunities.

After his internship, he returned to Switzerland and continued his studies. He simultaneously started to import Chinese furniture to Switzerland in collaboration with Chinese friends. The trading was successful and enabled him to subsidise his studies as well as to put aside start-up capital for other business endeavours. He soon left Switzerland again for six months, participating in a student exchange program to Taiwan. He then moved back to Southern China, where he has been living since 2010. After graduating in 2011, he became a full-time entrepreneur. However, furniture trading did not provide the chal-

lenge that Boris was looking for. Therefore, he built a more innovative, ICT-related company serving the local Chinese market that is currently in a start-up phase. Additionally, he imports watches to China and runs a number of ICT-services for companies in Switzerland.

Boris spent his first seven months in China together with his former Swiss girlfriend. As a result, they spent most of their time together and did not get to know many Chinese and foreign people. After his girlfriend left China, he started to go out more often and to build up a circle of Chinese acquaintances in several cities in the Pearl River Delta. In recent years, he has also established friendships with other foreigners living in the Pearl River Delta and joined several business networks. Meeting other Swiss people gives Boris a feeling of familiarity and his closest friends are Swiss who live or have been living in China, or Asia and thus share similar experiences. On the other hand, he finds it difficult to keep up old friendships in Switzerland: "The problem is, one develops differently. It is sometimes difficult. What can you talk about? And opinions may differ."

The Chinese environment, meanwhile more familiar to him, still teaches him a lot: "You learn something new every day in China. I learn so much. You have so many experiences, it is really crazy." He finds it challenging to run his business due to high fluctuation of employees as well as cultural differences that require a different style of management than in Switzerland. However, he does not negotiate this as an obstacle but rather as a way to improve his social and management skills.

Migrating to China for Boris is thus a way to realize his personal and entrepreneurial ambitions. Accustomed to a traveling lifestyle and going abroad since his childhood, the actual spatial move to the other side of the globe is not perceived as a far-reaching act of migration. Rather, Boris negotiates it as just another (potentially temporary) transition in a generally mobile and flexible life course:

“Well, I never said that I want to make my life abroad. If I get up tomorrow and say: ‘I go home,’ then I go home. (...). Or I go to another place.”

Aldina: “So, coming to China was not a major issue for you?”

Boris: “No, I am open-minded. I like traveling.”

At the same time, Boris also displays a strong sense of belonging in Switzerland. On the one hand, it is an emotionally important place of childhood and family ties. On the other hand, he has come to appreciate aspects of life in Switzerland more than before: “It is almost unique in the world (...) The standards that we have, the values, the education and the whole environment. How safe it is, the quality of life, sincerity and all those things.” He also maintains active professional ties with a couple of Swiss clients and as board member of a company in Switzerland. This is the main reason why he keeps up his domicile in Switzerland. In China, Boris has been holding a business visa since 2007.

Even though he will continue to plan his life in a flexible way and intends to stay internationally mobile, a return to Switzerland is a viable option for Boris. Asked about his future, Boris says: “I am in China for the time being, that is for sure. If you establish a company and then you leave the next day, that doesn’t make sense. Therefore, I will stay in the short run. Let us see how long for. I have no idea.” He specifies later on in the interview that he might move back to Switzerland in five to ten years’ time. One reason to return is the possibility becoming a parent:

“I have thought about this a few times already, if I had children, I would find it good for them to grow up in Switzerland. Maybe not straight from the beginning, maybe a bit later so that they can also experience other cultures. But (...) the values in Switzerland, I find this very important.”

Veronika

Our interview partner, Veronika (age thirty-seven), settled in Stockholm (Sweden) in 2011. She was born and raised in the German part of Switzerland, and later lived in different Swiss cities. Her professional career started in hotel

management before she moved on to business consultancy. Prior to her move to Sweden, Veronika worked as a consultant and gained a degree in Sustainability Studies. Her goal was to work at the intersection of these professional interests, but she did not succeed in finding a suitable position in Switzerland.

Therefore, she looked for other ways to move on: “It was just time for something new. I needed a period of self-reflection. Probably, it also could have happened in Lugano⁵ or Lausanne⁶. But not in the German speaking part of Switzerland. A new dimension was needed.” Her partner at the time was working for an international company and was offered a new in-house position close to Stockholm. Sweden was not the ideal destination for the couple but they were both interested in Scandinavia.

The final motivator to move up North was a mix of career opportunities and a quest for personal fulfilment.

“I guess the crucial factor was (...) that I was ready for something new, to broaden my horizon. At that time, I was already working for five years at the same business consultancy and I didn’t like it there anymore. My boyfriend at that time and I had been together for about four years. We decided that we wanted to do something new. A new phase of life and children were not an option. And then the subject of going abroad came up, living somewhere else, and most of all finding a new job was the big theme.”

Veronika felt a desire to challenge herself in an unknown setting. She was convinced that her life in Switzerland was too familiar and would not challenge her to grow. Moving abroad was the key to open new doors both for her private and professional life.

After a rather long process of looking for jobs and apartments in Sweden, everything was finally in order to make the transition. Shortly before leaving Switzerland, however, Veronika split up with her boyfriend. Nevertheless, she

⁵ A Swiss city and the capital of the Italian speaking Canton of Ticino.

⁶ A major city in the French speaking part of Switzerland.

decided to keep up her plans, and she left Switzerland without knowing anybody in Sweden.

Despite having already had a job contract, the move to Sweden was not an easy one. For instance, it was difficult for Veronika to find a place to live. Housing space in Sweden is primarily for sale, and it is thus very hard to find a flat or house for rent. Moreover, a mortgage from a Swedish bank requires a local, Swedish warrantor, which makes it difficult for foreigners to buy property. Another obstacle was getting a Swedish national ID number which makes official or administrative actions possible, including opening a bank account or securing insurance. However, the freedom of movement within the European Union⁷ provided Veronika with an advantage in her job search and in taking up residency in Sweden.

Furthermore, she found it challenging to establish a new social network:

“It is not easy in our age to build up a circle of friends without having children. I realized that it is difficult in business to build up a network, too. Here [in Stockholm], like in other big cities, a lot is working through acquaintances. People know each other from their time at school or university, from the military, from volunteering and so on. This way, it is easier to get access to potential clients and to be invited to meetings. I did not quite manage yet to network successfully in career terms.”

In order to get to know people, she first tried to socialize with other foreigners. “In the beginning, I joined some so-called expat events. But that was not my world. I did not enjoy it.” After a while, though, thanks to a sports club, she found some friends and became increasingly familiar with Swedish.

Since 2012, she has been together with her Swedish partner. This relationship has changed her perception of living in Sweden. It makes it more fulfilling and satisfying and she spends most of her leisure time with her boyfriend. Veronika explains how her new relationship

eased her attempt of making Sweden her new home: “It [the new relationship] contributed a lot, that I just felt better. It is like a catalyser. It helps to understand each other, to feel good and comfortable. You are not fighting alone anymore, it is not a lonely adventure anymore.”

Overall, Veronika feels welcome in Sweden in terms of how she is received by the society. In her experience, as a Swiss migrant in Stockholm, she belongs in the category of ‘good immigrants’ from a local point of view— or is not perceived as a migrant at all.

Veronika describes herself as a person who is happy with a small circle of friends. In Switzerland, she only maintained a few close friendships. This character trait helped her to better adjust in Sweden, as she does not depend on a big social network in order to feel at home. However, more and more, she has started to appreciate this small but long-standing circle of old friends. They are the last “points of references” of her old life, as she puts it. Veronika feels close to them even though she lives ten thousand kilometres away. “It is as if I would just live in a different city. But for my friends, that feeling is not the same. For them, I am far away living a different life in a different country.”

Speaking about her future plans, Veronika mentions the new and growing ambivalence towards Switzerland. On the one hand, she misses the diversity, the differing ideas of what a ‘good life’ is, and the individual space Swiss society grants. On the other hand, she has learned to appreciate not having too many social obligations and enjoy her freedom and the distance from her family. “This I would not have had in Switzerland. The expectations would have been different in Switzerland.” However, lately she finds herself thinking more often about living in Switzerland again. She appreciates the long-lasting friendships and thinks of her parents growing older and older. Another reason for her to return to Switzerland would be the possibility of having children. She would return mainly because of, in her opinion, the poor quality of public schooling in Sweden.

⁷ Switzerland is not a member of the European Union but it participates in the EU-freedom of movement scheme.

She also discovered her adventuresome side in the past years. She spends most holidays with her partner, travelling to various countries all over the world. Besides moving back to Switzerland, Veronika also considers a new beginning in a different country, one with a similar standard of living, such as Canada, USA, New Zealand or Australia: "I feel like pressing the start button again. I really liked the phase of departure and arrival when moving to Sweden." In this regard, her boyfriend's lack of interest in moving abroad is a challenging situation. He is very much rooted in Sweden and does not see himself living elsewhere.

Interestingly, Veronika thinks she would have taken similar decisions regarding career, relationship, hobbies and other aspects of her life, had she stayed in Switzerland. She says that she did not "reinvent" herself. So, to her, the relocation to Sweden represents a fulfilling project that could have happened elsewhere as well.

Ricardo

Ricardo (age fifty-one) was born as the child of Italian immigrants about whom he said: "They were workers, Italians (...) migrants from the 1950s, 1960s." He grew up, worked and lived in the same city in the German speaking part of Switzerland until he moved to China in 2009.

Moving to China was Ricardo's first own experience of international migration but mobility in a broader sense has been a life-long theme: "It has settled down to periods of approximately eight to ten years after which I have to start something new." He started his professional education with a vocational training as an electrician but turned to car sales soon afterwards and later earned a degree in Business Administration. After nine to ten years in car sales, Ricardo decided to try a fresh start and became Human Resources-consultant. After working for approximately a decade in Human Resources, he looked for a new challenge again and became a manager. Before moving to Shanghai, Ricardo held a senior managerial position in a major state-owned Swiss company.

His decision to migrate to China was inspired in part by a long-standing fascination with the country and his earlier first-hand experiences living as a tourist and language student. Ricardo is unable to tell when and why this fascination with China started and mused, half-jokingly, that he might have been a Chinese emperor in one of his former lives. He practiced Chinese martial arts and Tai Chi for many years when he was younger and travelled to China regularly as an adult. Later, in 2008, he took a sabbatical leave and spent several weeks studying Chinese in Shanghai. When he returned to Switzerland, he decided to resign from his job. He then went back to Shanghai in 2009 to pursue his language studies for six months, which he later extended for another year. Over the course of the year, he gradually came to the decision to stay in Shanghai.

According to him, he had a good life in Switzerland. Yet, it had become too easy for him and the opportunity to move to China and become an entrepreneur was a way to face yet another challenge.

"Well, this company (in Shanghai), I founded it because (...) I wanted to do something that not everybody does. To leave Switzerland. I had an apartment, a beautiful apartment, a nice car. I had everything there, a good, decent life. To pull up stakes and start from scratch here, one needs to be a bit crazy, right? (...) But you also need the will that it takes to build something here. And the will to start a new life (...) with all the necessary paperwork, visa, and so on."

Ricardo continuously sets and reaches new goals throughout his life course. This happens not through absolute, static planning, but by way of flexible adaptation and continuous change. According to him, this is common nowadays and a result of macro-level processes:

"I used to work in HR and I used to ask: 'What are your plans for the next three to five years?' Today, I would only ask: 'What are your plans for the next months, maybe one to two years?' Right? Life today, in our world, in our globalizing world, it is not possible to make three year-plans anymore."

Ricardo's professional career in Switzerland afforded him a relatively affluent lifestyle. This

enabled him to stop working, focus on Mandarin studies and then to contribute towards the start-up capital for his company in China. In order to realise his ambition of becoming an entrepreneur in Shanghai, he had to downsize.

Therefore, once in China, Ricardo became aware of the conveniences and privileges that come with living in and being from Switzerland: "One learns to highly appreciate Switzerland. How well off the Swiss population actually is. (...) The quietness, for example, but also the safety. The social security. The Chinese don't have all this." Ricardo is, to some extent, still participating in this Swiss public old-age insurance system. Furthermore, his health insurance is covered by a private Swiss company for people who are living abroad. However, he dropped out of the second pillar of old-age insurance, the occupational pension fund system.

Switzerland's characteristics that make it feel like a safe haven also contributed to Ricardo's decision to risk the move to China and become an entrepreneur in the first place: "It cannot go worse than wrong. And I can always go back to Switzerland. (...) That is why I said, I will give it a try."

While he describes his daily life and his personal interactions with Chinese people in a positive way, Ricardo expresses mixed feelings about the Chinese state:

"Because the Chinese state can come from one day to the other and say: 'We don't allow foreigners into China anymore'. (...) I have experienced this here a couple of times already, in terms of decisions made by the state. (...) And I do not like depending on a state too much. (...) And it is obvious that China wants to cut down on the number of foreigners. They are reducing the numbers. I know this from a reliable source (...)."

His closest friends, his parents, and his sister live in Switzerland and he stays in touch with them over social media or on his yearly trips to Switzerland. In Shanghai, he has established a diverse social and professional network consisting both of people with Chinese and Western backgrounds. He lives together with his Chinese

partner, whom he met after he had settled in Shanghai.

Talking about his plans for the future, Ricardo explains that his professional activity as well as his whereabouts will eventually be subject to yet another change. If his health allows, he intends to work as long as possible. However, he plans to pull out of his company once it is consolidated. At this point, a decade of staying in China will be over and it will be time again for something new. As he does not see himself aging in China, this could take him either back to Switzerland or to another country. The choice of destination is flexible and will also depend on his partners' circumstances: "I will maybe leave China. Again. (...) I do not know where to. It may be to Thailand, but maybe also to Bali or Indonesia. No idea. I have to see with my boyfriend how he sees it. But it can also be to Switzerland."

As these three examples show, approaching their experience through life story interviews enables our respondents to trace the unfolding of their migratory trajectory in their own way. By telling their individual stories, their major motives for their actions and important stages of their trajectory become apparent. Furthermore, it is possible to identify the ways in which regimes and "politics of mobility" are experienced by our respondents and what kind of language they use to describe their mobile and migratory practices. The following sections explore these insights more in depth.

The unfolding of mobile migration trajectories: antecedents, patterns and stages

The exemplary cases presented above show how (e)migration is often preceded by other forms of geographical mobility. A focus on the processual character and different (pre-) stages of migration, as mentioned earlier, especially well-developed in writings on lifestyle migration (e.g. Benson and O'Reilly 2009; 2016; Benson and Osbaldiston 2016), helps to unpack how migration is linked to mobility: Frequent moves within one's home country as well as travels to, or short-term stays

in the future 'host' country or other destinations are common experiences of our interview partners. Boris has travelled regularly since his childhood and lived abroad temporarily several times, both in the US and Asia, before moving to China. Similarly, Ricardo first travelled to China to spend several holidays. Then, during a second language study stay, he gradually decided to turn his temporary mobility to China into (im)migration. Veronika had lived and worked in several cities in Switzerland before moving to Sweden. Thus, understanding migration as a journey, as Knowles (2010; 2012) and Schapendonk et al. (2014) have described, is a helpful perspective for the analysis of our collected life stories.

Another crucial element we observed are the various life events that play important roles in shaping both the form and direction of migration, and become visible when applying a life course approach (see also Bailey and Mulder 2017; Kou and Bailey 2014; Moret 2016) to our respondents' migration journeys. For instance, in certain cases, love acts as a powerful incentive to leave one's home country. Meeting a new partner in the country of arrival, like Veronika and Ricardo did, can change the way one feels in the current situation and influence plans for onward movement. Other life events, such as becoming a parent as Boris and Veronika had discussed, a divorce or separation, and aging have the capacity to spark reflection about the country of residence's meaning and consideration for onward migration. In some cases, the native country becomes more appreciated and return migration is taken into account.

However, professional careers are another central aspect shaping the migration trajectory of many of our interview partners. New job-related opportunities can be a major incentive to migrate. Boris was attracted by the Chinese market's opportunities for young entrepreneurs like him. For Veronika, the perspective of new challenges and professional alternatives were one of the main reasons for her move to Sweden. This holds also true for Ricardo, who had the wish to do something truly pioneering and challenging,

and he found a good place for realizing such an endeavour in China.

Nevertheless, the evolution of social networks (Schapendonk 2015) plays a crucial role as well. Like in Ricardo's and Veronika's case, long-term relationships with old friends in Switzerland may last and remain important. However, Boris realises that he slowly loses common ground with his old Swiss friends while he feels closest to other Swiss with similar international experiences. At the same time, all three life stories illustrate that it matters how the social contacts in the country of residence evolve. Dating a 'local' partner, being a student, or having a family can have a positive effect on the set-up of a new social network, lead to a feeling of belonging and be conducive for business. In Boris's case, having come to China with his Swiss girlfriend initially kept him from building up new contacts, and he only become more socially active when she had left. Difficulties with establishing new, lasting friendships, on the other hand, has the potential to affect one's well-being and facilitate a decision for onward movement. Yet, a small or fluctuating social network can also be perceived as a form of new personal and social freedom. Veronika suffered from her initial lack of contacts but also came to relish having fewer social obligations in Sweden.

In the same way, once our respondents took the first step to detach from a place and their own social network, they began to develop the desire for and a certain flexibility to relocate to a new place or country (Kalir 2013). Boris has grown up travelling and accordingly sees himself moving again at some point in the future. Veronika feels like repeating the exciting experience of arriving in a new country, and onward migration is a valid option for her as well as for Ricardo.

The migration-mobilities continuum in practice and in discourse

As mentioned in the previous section, we observe how lines between geographical travel, mobility, and migration are blurring in our respondents' trajectories. This applies not only to movements

in space but also to other forms of mobility. In all three life stories, constant self-development figures as a major guiding principle and results in a high degree of professional and upward social mobility. Scholarship on Lifestyle Migration has contributed substantial analytical tools to look at questions of individualism and self-development (e.g. Salazar 2014; Benson and O'Reilly 2009).

From our respondents' perspective, moving to Sweden and China was another step – a project, in Veronika's words – in a generally mobile and change-oriented life course. In this sense, migration is one way of staying mobile but is, by no means, the only one. This insight goes along with Hui's (2016, 78) approach where she states that "moving beyond migrant exceptionalism is important because in the context of people's whole lives, migration is not the only frame that helps to make sense of change, adaptation, social roles, power or inequality."

In our respondents' cases, rewarding migration experiences reinforce their long-standing preference for varied and mobile lifestyles. As a result, both Ricardo and Veronika consider moving to other places for another fresh start. And for all three of them, a return migration back to Switzerland figures as a possible way of further self-development and mobility.

Another crucial, related aspect is how our respondents present their trajectories in a positively-connoted language of individualism, agency and change. Hence, the underlying values of the favourable and entrepreneurial mobilities discourse (see above), resound strongly in the way Boris, Veronika, and Ricardo negotiate and assess their life stories. This is further reflected in Ricardo's explanation about how people, including himself, plan in shorter and shorter cycles in order to accommodate the demands of a globalising world. Moret similarly points out the importance of looking at how "mobility may transform into a form of capital" (2016, 1455) which can be used individually for different purposes.

Accordingly, our respondents generally do not apply the labels 'migrant' and 'migration' to their own experience. Rather, by resorting to a vocab-

ulary of travel, open-mindedness and mobility, they presented their trajectory as somehow different from what they would describe as migration. Boris, for instance, emphasises that his stay in China is not a "life abroad" but a flexible condition that could be changed any time. This confirms the juxtaposition discussed above of some migratory movements understood as 'mobility' and others as 'migration.' The 'common-sense category' of migration as something problematic and linked to disadvantaged people is also evident when Veronika reflects that she is rarely perceived as a migrant in Stockholm, or, if she is, she is considered a 'good' migrant. Ricardo, on the other hand, refers to his Italian parents as migrants. This mirrors the 'common-sense distinction' between his own, favourable and thus 'non-migrant' status as mobile and skilled Swiss entrepreneur in China as opposed to his parents' situation when they migrated. They moved to Switzerland as economic migrants in the 1950s/60s and thus belong to a group of immigrants long stigmatized by the Swiss society.

Mobility politics and regimes of mobility

Powerful discourses of individualism and flexibility, and 'good' mobility versus 'problematic' migration shape the experiences and negotiations of our respondents. Furthermore, politics (Cresswell 2010) and regimes (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) of mobility operate on various levels, as exemplified in the life stories of Ricardo, Boris and Veronika.

In this regard, the comparably affluent and powerful Swiss state with a relatively balanced distribution of wealth plays an important role in mediating our respondents' possibilities and attitudes.

For instance, Swiss nationality gives access to a very favourable regime of international mobility, granting visa-free entry to around 170 countries in the world, as well as Switzerland's participation in the freedom of movement scheme of the European Union. As a result, our respondents can easily and regularly go abroad for tour-

ism or short-term stays. Furthermore, potential barriers to (future) migration, such as visa regulations or exchange rates, are largely absent in our respondents' considerations. On this basis, migratory movements can be negotiated within a framework of personal freedom and multi-optionality.

Furthermore, comprehensive social insurance schemes, a relatively stable economy and political system in Switzerland, along with a comparably low rate of unemployment, grant a sense of security to our respondents. This expounds the power of a state to shape its citizens' life and, as in our case, mobility decision (Kalir 2013; Söderström et al. 2013). Should a Swiss abroad return to Switzerland, the chances of finding a lucrative job is likely and, worst case scenario, social welfare would be provided. Swiss citizens living outside the EU, such as Ricardo and Boris, have the possibility to participate in pension and health insurance schemes and are thus able to keep a considerable level of social security, often higher compared to residents in their current country of residence. Moreover, most interview partners, including Ricardo, mention that having the 'safe Swiss haven' to return to facilitated the decision to become mobile and migrate to another country in the first place. Keeping domicile in Switzerland is another strategy that many of our respondents, mainly those living in China, employ. Boris continues as a board member of a Swiss company, but most others keep domicile in Switzerland in order to benefit from the more favourable conditions of the Swiss social security system for residents.

Moreover, their education and professional experience in Switzerland provides our respondents with globally competitive economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983; Moret 2016). As exemplified by the experiences of Ricardo, Veronika, and Boris, many Swiss (and citizens of other privileged countries) who go abroad are well-endowed to participate in "politics of mobility" and can convert their capital into a broad range of options concerning destinations, careers and lifestyles.

However, Ricardo's feelings about the Chinese state show that nation-states' regimes of mobility unsettle even rather privileged and affluent migrants. The latent threat that his visa might be renounced, as well as the legal system in China, affect his sense of security and stability. For Veronika, while she faces no obstacles in terms of residence and employment, the regime of the Swedish state becomes evident in the mortgage regulations that makes it hard for foreigners to buy property and settle in Stockholm.

The migration trajectories we observe in our ethnographic research may be presented in a language of fluidity, agency and multi-optionality, but they are by no means state- and frictionless mobilities. We argue that the relatively privileged socio-economic and national backgrounds enable our respondents to participate in this discourse of being independent, mobile and entrepreneurial individuals in a globalizing world. The Swiss citizenship and the option to go back to Switzerland, if necessary, provide our respondents with various options denied to a majority of migrants in the world and fundamentally influences their migration decisions and experiences.

Conclusion

In this article, we shed light on the migration-mobility continuum by approaching it from different angles. Initially, our study about Swiss people leaving their home country for a longer period of time prompted reflections about the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and the somewhat limited scope of migration both as an academic and common-sense category. Yet, we find that replacing a migration studies with a mobilities lens approach provides only a superficial solution for overcoming these dilemmas in our research. Instead, we conclude that the key lies in a cross-fertilizing combination of critical mobilities and migration research, and a thorough exploration of its underlying assumptions. The methodological approach we put forward is based on ethnographic research and a data-grounded analysis using life story interviews.

As a result, we are able to discover and relate aspects of our respondents' life stories that may have remained invisible otherwise. For instance, we find that other forms of mobility preceded and intersect with the actual move out of Switzerland. Moreover, motives for migration are often embedded in a discourse of personal progress and flexibility rather than presented as a far-reaching, one-time and permanent emigration. Still, many respondents who initially intended to leave for a limited period of time happen to spend a larger portion of their lives abroad. Yet, their current situation is often negotiated as impermanent, with the option of forward or return migration. Had we employed a traditional conceptualization of "migration from A to B," these aspects might have remained hidden. On the other hand, intent on avoiding the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and thus trying "not to think about migration like a state" (see Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013, 193), we were surprised by the importance of the Swiss state and Swiss citizenship in shaping emotional negotiations, as well as actual options for our respondents' mobile practices. This might have become less evident had we tried to design our research as a mobilities study.

Furthermore, as we have elaborated in the introductory part to this paper, common-sense meanings of 'migration' and 'mobility' differ greatly. It is thus interesting to observe how our respondents represent their migration trajectories accordingly – in a language of fluidity, mobility and multi-optionality. Moreover, we trace how those seemingly state- and frictionless mobilities occur within mostly favourable and thus invisible politics and regimes of mobility that influence our respondents' perceptions and actions.

Hence, a critical and data-grounded mobilities-informed migration lens offers a more flexible and open model to approach life-stories without denying the 'migratory facticity' of mobility experiences. Seemingly unrelated aspects like professional and socio-economic mobility, studying (abroad), tourism, and migratory moves can be dis- and re-entangled. Thinking about these

aspects blur the lines between migration and mobility both in human experience as well as in its analytical understanding, which can be further explored.

In our opinion, investigating privileged forms of migratory movements under the umbrella of (critical and mobilities-informed) migration research strengthens its potential analytical breadth and depth. This also has the potential to challenge its often misleadingly narrow and problematizing use in both areas of research. Instead, this may open up new ways of approaching more disadvantaged forms of migration analytically and enable researchers to emphasise that all migrants, despite their more or less advantageous situations, are equal people and thus share experiences and emotions.

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Note on the Author

ALDINA CAMENISCH is a social and cultural anthropologist at the University of Basel in Switzerland. Her current research interests include (privileged) migration and mobility, especially in non-European contexts. In her ethnographic PhD project, she investigates the trajectories and positionalities of Swiss migrants in Mainland China.

SERAINA Müller is a social and cultural anthropologist at the University of Basel in Switzerland. She is currently working on migration and mobility with a special focus on belonging and communication in the digital age. In the context of her PhD, she does ethnographic research among Swiss migrants living in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

