Introduction

The Role of Social Imagination in Strategies of Im/Mobility in Sierra Leone and Liberia

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Abstract

This section introduction explores the imaginative dimension of mobility in two West African countries, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Building on literature that highlights the existential dimension of movement and migration, the authors explore three socio-cultural patterns that inform representations of im/mobility: historical continuities and the *longue-durée* perspective on mobile practices, the association of geographical mobility with social betterment, and the interaction between local aspirations and the imaginary of global modernity. The three individual contributions by Bedert, Enria and Ménard bring out the work of imagination attached to im/mobility both in 'home' countries and diaspora communities, and underline the continuity of representations and practices between spaces that are part of specific transnational social fields.

Keywords

imagination – immobility – aspiration – Sierra Leone – Liberia

Résumé

Cette introduction explore la dimension imaginative de la mobilité dans deux pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest, la Sierra Leone et le Libéria. En s'appuyant sur la littérature qui met en évidence la dimension existentielle du mouvement et de la migration, les auteurs explorent trois schémas socioculturels qui informent les représentations de l'im/mobilité: les continuités historiques et la perspective de longue durée sur les pratiques de mobilité, l'association entre mobilité géographique et amélioration sociale, et l'interaction entre les aspirations locales et l'imaginaire de la modernité globale. Les trois contributions de Bedert, Enria et Ménard mettent en lumière le travail de l'imaginaire attaché à l'im/mobilité tant dans les pays « d'origine » que dans les communautés diasporiques, et soulignent la continuité des représentations et des pratiques entre des espaces qui s'inscrivent dans des champs sociaux transnationaux distincts.

Mots-clés

imagination – immobilité – aspiration – Sierra Leone – Libéria

'Mobility', as a contemporary concept, foregrounds the acceleration of material and immaterial flows in a globalised world.¹ In the social sciences, the 'mobility turn' has put movement at the centre of research enquiries, pointing to phenomena of increased 'real-world' and 'imaginative' travel, combined with the influence of technology on local lives (Urry 2007; Sheller and Urry 2006). These technologies (mobile and non-mobile telephony, global televisual mass-media, and the internet) enable a circulation of information that transforms ideas and projections about other places (Appadurai 1996). It gives a sense of immediacy and intimacy with places that one has never seen, while crafting an imagined global 'modernity' that people situated at the global margins can aspire to (Ferguson 2006). Regardless of such aspirations, however, international migration remains structured by inequalities of power within "the global political system of nation-states" (Salazar 2011: 3). The unequal distribution of power is materialised in state policing, border technologies, and the use of violence (Cresswell

1 This collection of papers emerged out of the conference *Those Who Stay: How Out Migration Affects West African Societies*, organised by Prof. Dr. Jacqueline Knörr and Agathe Menetrier at the Research Group 'Conflict and Integration along the Upper Guinea Coast' of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle/Saale, Germany) in April 2018.

2012: 650). Transnational movement is increasingly controlled and restricted, forcing people to stay put and disregarding their aspirations to mobility. As Kleist (2018) expresses it, technologies that generate ideas of a good life become more widely available while co-existing with restrictive mobility regimes, forming a 'mobility paradox' that shapes local hopes and aspirations. In the context of international border crossings, therefore, immobility is largely seen as the absence of movement. Yet, anthropologists have shown that immobility has a social substance in itself – it has determinants of its own (Schewel 2020: 329), results from multiple social, cultural and economic factors, and may be given positive social value (Gaibazzi 2015).

Drawing on the productive tension between movement and its absence, the contributions in this section explore the role of social imagination in strategies of im/mobility. With an ethnographic focus on Sierra Leone and Liberia, the authors build on recent anthropological studies that highlight, in addition to mere physical movement between locations, the metaphysical and existential dimensions of mobility and migration (see for example Hage and Papadopoulos 2004). They focus on the social meaning and values attached to im/mobility in rural, urban and diaspora communities, and to its related practices. Despite their different ethnographic foci, the three authors approach social imagination as human agency, as "a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (Appadurai 1996: 7). Social imagination, in its collective dimension, is a force that drives decisions on whether (or not) to move, informs the 'where' and 'how' of migration trajectories, and encourages reflection on predicaments of the here and now. Following Appadurai's conceptualisation, imagination is understood here as a set of social practices that entails "negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and a globally defined field of possibility" (ibid: 31). The work of imagination produces and reproduces collective images about an 'elsewhere' that seems both separate and also close and familiar – an 'elsewhere' just at one's fingertips. As the contributors also show, the imagination of mobility is not only informed by global processes, but is also nourished by social evaluations of mobility practices that are locally and historically grounded and context-specific. Those social evaluations remain relevant for people who are involved in transnational movements, as much as they are for those who remain put.

The contributions within this section explore representations and transnational ramifications of (im)mobility in two West African neighbouring states. In so doing, the articles offer a vital vantage point from which to explore the continuities between the globally and locally grounded processes that inform the imagination of im/mobility. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia have similar colonial and post-colonial trajectories shaped by global and regional migration

patterns. They have experienced the lasting consequences of settler-colonial regimes established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² These regimes installed distinctive social hierarchies and power relations between groups, which generated specific ideas about social mobility. More recently, in the 1990s, devastating civil wars caused intense waves of forced migration throughout the region. During this period, many people took part in international resettlement programs. Today, both countries continue to be defined in terms of economic precarity and general hardship, not least due to health crises like the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic which struck both countries (and their neighbour, Guinea) in 2014–2016.

People in Sierra Leone and Liberia, together with those who have left both countries for other parts of the world, are embedded in transnational fields that have emerged from regional history. Building on earlier studies that analyse movement as connectedness, the authors explore the cultural and discursive linkages that exist between spaces that are part of specific transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004). Although those fields are highly fragmented – along generational, gender, social or geographical lines – as the emigrants who make them up are now dispersed across the globe (Lubkemann 2018, 2009), shared socio-cultural patterns can be identified within them. Those patterns link both people and spaces through distinct representations of im/mobility that are deployed at multiple scales, from the local to the global.

We identify three of these patterns in the papers that follow, and will discuss them in more detail in the remainder of this introduction. Firstly, in this region, historical continuity constitutes the point of departure for the emergence of a sociocultural frame of reference regarding im/mobility. Thus, the analysis of local representations is grounded within a *longue-durée* perspective of geographical and cross-cultural travel that has moulded local identifications and initiated social change. Secondly, physical mobility, in order to be socially valued, implies social mobility and vice-versa. Representations of im/mobility in the region are highly normative, in that they associate movement with social betterment. Spaces, from the local to the global, are linked to specific ideas of achievement, and those who have left their homes to travel have often done so with locally-defined ideas of what they needed to achieve *with* mobility. Thirdly, when collective ideas about im/mobility interact with individual

2 While the colonial regimes in Liberia and Sierra Leone showed a lot of similarities with European colonialism in many other African states, the African origins of the settlers in both countries complicated their relationship with indigenous populations. Whereas the early settlers had experienced slavery and aspired to establishing a free land, they soon reproduced hierarchies between natives and non-natives based on perceived racial and social differences.

agency, they do so *in specific spaces*. The social imagination of im/mobility, as a collective frame of reference embedded in modernity, defines the local meaning(s) of being im/mobile, but also provides culturally-informed assumptions about other places, thus shaping individual aspirations and practices. Nevertheless, aspirations and practices are spatially situated and respond to the context in which they are deployed. Before exploring those processes in more detail, we first elaborate briefly on the notion of imagination and the way it links to im/mobility.

1 Social Imagination, Mobility and Scale

Imagination, in its common use, refers to the ways in which ideas are formed and reproduced (this includes ideas about, for example, home, elsewhere, the self and the other). In current anthropological theory, social imagination is closely associated with the analysis of modernity and globalisation (Taylor 2005; Appadurai 1996). For Appadurai, the imagination is deployed in and through processes of migration and interaction with mass-media, thereby establishing a close connection between modernity and mobility in both its material and immaterial manifestations. Taylor's (1995: 31) concept of modernity focuses on the cultural shift to a "modern social imaginary," one that includes the rise of individualism and the ability of humans to understand themselves as agents. The emergence of this imaginary is concomitant with increased mobility, as both involve practices and meanings whose relationship to the public sphere is mediated by new technologies, which modify the nature of social exchange and the perception of time (Taylor 2004, 1995: 30). As a conceptual framework, Taylor's focus on agency and mobility implies an entanglement between the imagination and modernity that leads to the emergence of collective agencies and their associated, shared representations.

Against this backdrop, anthropologists have used the concept of the 'imaginary' to empirically explore the co-existence of multiple and historically-situated 'modernities', and to analyse how 'modern' phenomena are translated, appropriated or resisted in different social and cultural worlds (Gaonkar 2002: 4). Recent approaches have seen the social imagination process as one, implying a significant degree of personal freedom and creativity for those who participate in it: this freedom leads to the creation of new ideas about the world (Robbins 2010; Sneath et al. 2009). Deployment of the imaginary allows individuals to engage their social world by making sense of its extra-individual processes, which are situated at various times and in various spaces. As Vigh (2006: 483) puts it, "it is through the social imagination that we locate our-

selves in the world, position ourselves in relation to others and seek to grasp our potential and anticipated future.” From this perspective, the imagination becomes the capacity to shape one’s life beyond the reality of the here and now, to recreate the contours of one’s world in an open-ended way, and to project the self towards future horizons (Crapanzano 2004: 14; see Appadurai 2004).

The social imagination of mobility, as illustrated in the contributions we present here, can be defined as both a form of human comprehension and a mode of social engagement, drawing on shared meanings that connect temporal and spatial scales and constitute a ground for action. By drawing attention to *scales*, our purpose is to emphasise the relational dimension of the social imagination – namely, a set of culturally-informed images, values and meanings about mobility that creates a continuity both through time and space. The concept of social imagination captures collective appropriations of the world that emerge from the “place-based practices and modes of consciousness” through which cultures and societies are reproduced (Salazar 2011: 3). The analytical conflation of the imagination and modernity has implied a theoretical focus on international migration (see King and Skeldon 2010). The contributions in this issue re-examine the connections between internal and international mobility with reference to a continuum of representations and practices, and to the transnational social field to which that continuum belongs (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). A focus on im/mobility reveals a social imaginary that persists, and is transformed, across borders and time while involving people, objects, and technologies that either move or are unable to move. As already mentioned, three dimensions of social imagination stand out: the way historical processes inform contemporary representations of mobility and images of the ‘elsewhere’, normativity related to im/mobility, and the articulations between the imaginary of modernity and local realities.

2 Imagination and the Past

The contributions in this section address how representations of mobility connect various temporal scales. These connections may bind the historical *longue-durée* to individual and collective anticipations of the future that are of shorter duration, perhaps even limited to a lifetime (see Vigh 2006). Whether it may concern representations of the transatlantic slave trade among young men in Sierra Leone (Enria, this issue), the reproduction of rural-urban migration patterns and aspirations for an elsewhere based on the colonial past in Liberia (Bedert, this issue), or the reproduction of hierarchies of mobility grounded in

historical connections among international migrants living in France (Ménard, this issue), the past continues to inspire imaginaries across lines of gender and generation, as well as those of locality.

The imagination, as a continuum of representations, depends for its realisation on cultural frontiers moulded by specific histories in which individual ideals, plans and aspirations are deployed. The flow of imaginative creativity does not take place in a historical vacuum, but is embedded in a sociocultural setting that shapes the realm of imaginative possibilities and potentials for action (Robbins 2010). The individual freedom by which people imagine their social world and establish connections with others is “differently understood, located, and realised in each culture” (ibid.: 307). Representations and strategies of mobility in both Liberia and Sierra Leone are historically and socially *emplaced*. A distant ‘elsewhere’ is not considered as disconnected or discontinuous, but is given a place in a (trans)localised geography.

The West African coastal region has long been part of global networks of exchange and flows of goods and people. Historically, it was intra-regional movement that produced the highly diversified cultural and linguistic makeup of the region (d’Azevedo 1962; Hair 1967). Mobility, under various forms, shaped the contours of an area whose historical and cultural features are strikingly related (Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010: 7). Precolonial migration from the interior to the coast, as well as long-distance trade and the creation of political alliances, facilitated the incorporation of strangers in local societies and the emergence of fluid identities and multiethnic polities (ibid.: 9–10). Contacts between local African populations and Europeans were initiated as early as the fifteenth century, which saw the foundation of Portuguese trading posts along the Atlantic coast. From those relations emerged specific identities, and mixed – (*métis* or *mestizo*) – cultural identities, such as the Luso-Creole groups of the Senegambia (Mark 2002). Further along the Sierra Leone coast, ‘Eurafricans’ (Brooks 2003), the descendants of African women and European men, became economic and cultural brokers between local peoples and foreign traders; they secured trade routes and played a significant part in the slave trade. These processes resulted, for some coastal groups, in the incorporation of transnational connections into their identity. Among the Sherbro in Sierra Leone, for instance, the memory of British origins remains relevant to the articulation of contemporary Sherbro identities (Ménard 2015). Generally, in the region, connections to Europe and ‘the Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1992) became part of the social imaginary of West African populations, who appropriated and integrated them in local realities (and identities), and made ‘otherness’ their own. Today, local political cultures remain characterized by incorporation and transnational contact.

The transatlantic slave trade and its abolition in the nineteenth century was a turning point in the formation of transnational connections. The colonial histories of Sierra Leone and Liberia are marked by the trajectory of groups of free black people from Britain and the Americas, who were 'resettled' in West Africa. The settlers and their descendants, by maintaining links with the countries they came from, generated the early formation of transnational social fields that tied their countries to Europe and the United States.

The colony of Sierra Leone was founded by British philanthropists in 1787 as the 'Province of Freedom', where the 'Black Poor' living in England could be relocated. Those early settlers were soon joined by other groups from the Americas, the Nova Scotians and the Maroons of Jamaica. In 1808, Britain declared the territory of Freetown and its surroundings a Crown Colony. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Africans captured on slave ships were resettled in the colony. The Liberated Africans, as they were known, became the colony's major population group. A process of social and cultural creolisation involving the settlers, the Liberated Africans and local populations ensued, and led to the formation, by the mid-nineteenth century, of the Krio group (see Wyse 1989). Krio identity evolved towards exclusivity and solidified a higher social status (Cohen 1981; Porter 1963).³ Transnational connections and travelling to Britain were transformed into social and economic capital in Sierra Leone. Members of the Krio elite asserted their closeness to British values and the British way of life, and claimed that this conferred a certain superiority.

The history of the foundation of Liberia shows many similarities with that of Sierra Leone. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, there were increasing calls for the emancipation of slaves in the United States. To that effect, in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was founded. Its initial supporters were preachers, white abolitionists and southern slaveholders who promoted the idea of creating a new society in Africa. The last piece of this puzzle consisted of African Americans drawn to the idea of a fresh start elsewhere. Their numbers were small, and they were considered to be traitors by other free African Americans, who felt that the goal of the ACS was to silence further emancipation efforts (Fairhead et al. 2003: 10; Shick 1980: 7–8,). For many who travelled back to Africa, the ACS facilitated their re-migration, but not their re-subordination. Even though many of Liberia's settlers had fled white domination in the US, they reproduced many of its values in their new country (Liebenow 1989: 23). Racial differences between black and white, and between

3 The Krio formed a heterogeneous group with regard to religion, social and educational background, and livelihood (see Cole 2013; Dixon-Fyle and Cole 2006). Yet, the urban Christian elite became more closely identified with Krio identity.

mixed-race and local African origin, were reproduced and articulated fiercely. Besides the white agents and governors, mixed-race people tended to be more highly educated, had enjoyed more privileges back in the US, and were more likely to have had business experience. They tended to consider themselves to be higher on a racial scale than black people, and brought with them “a middle class, business oriented and urban culture” (Moran 1990: 58). As in Sierra Leone, social reproduction among settlers and their descendants resulted in the articulation of distinct hierarchies between groups. Similarly, the presence of privileged settlers contributed to representations of (local) social mobility as related to a distant elsewhere that were performed through specific cultural codes and social practices.

3 Im/Mobility and Normativity

In its historical dimension, mobility combines social and cultural factors that influence people's aspirations (and decisions) to move or stay. Recent scholarship shows the relevance of exploring migrants' goals, hopes and desires as social processes (see Carling and Collins 2018; Bal and Willems 2013). Kandell and Massey (2002), who analysed the reasons behind Mexican migration towards the USA, coined the term ‘cultures of migration’ to conceptualise the set of social and normative expectations that encourage people to move. ‘Cultures of migration’ may be defined, among other factors, by the generational transmission of social values regarding migration, the existence of transnational networks that spread over space and time, and the cultural celebration of migrants and their achievements (Laurent 2018; Horváth 2008; Ali 2007; Kandell and Massey 2002). ‘Staying behind’, in such cultural contexts, may become experienced as a failure. Thus, historical factors that incite people to be mobile have the potential to become consolidated through international migration, as in the case of Cape Verde, where migration has become a defining factor for both the nation and for individual families that build a collective ‘migration project’ over the course of several generations (Laurent 2018; Carling and Åkesson 2009).

The contributions in this section, therefore, highlight the co-production of places as bearers of distinct social values. On the one hand, the social imagination of mobility is intertwined with the articulation of space with sociocultural difference. As Gupta and Ferguson have demonstrated (1992: 6), the division of spatial entities rests on a ‘premise of discontinuity’ that emphasises and naturalises difference. Strategies of mobility, and international migration in particular, are grounded in ‘imaginative geographies’ (Gregory 1995) that co-

construe distance and difference as attributes of places, while at the same time also produce specific relational modes between them. Imaginative geographies generate a stock of pre-existing images of other places, but also frame an understanding of one's place *and* possibilities of action in the world (see Vigh 2006). The social value attributed to physical and social mobility relates to the way geographical spaces have been, and continue to be, imagined in relation to one another. It intersects with historically produced images about the 'elsewhere' and 'the other' (Salazar 2011). Luisa Enria's contribution demonstrates how practices around a specific medium, a game played by young urban residents on their mobile phones, generate narratives about migration that both reflect and produce opposing images of 'here' and 'there'. In their respective case-studies, Ménard and Bedert illustrate how discourses about 'civilisation' define social betterment as an attribute of the elsewhere, which becomes more valuable in itself.

Under these settler regimes, the concept of 'civilisation' separated Christian, educated settlers from 'native' people. In both contexts, 'civilised' continued to be opposed, linguistically, to 'country' (*kɔntri* in Krio), although both categories could cover experiences that 'can be shared by the same person' (Tonkin 1981: 322). The colonial concept of 'civilisation' not only included Christianity and literacy, but also the rejection of 'native' cultures. As a result, social mobility was perceived as involving a move towards 'civilised' ways borrowed from Europe and the Americas. Both Americo-Liberians and Krios displayed lifestyles, clothes and manners that made them stand apart from other groups (Cohen 1981; Fraenkel 1964). The adoption and performance of those signs conferred social superiority and contributed in grounding local ideas about social achievement as related to an imagined distant space. It has been in this context that autochthonous populations have employed various strategies to become 'civilised'. The most significant of these strategies have been marriage and child fosterage, by which a family of settlers would raise a child from a local family (see Bledsoe 1990; Moran 1990). In contemporary Sierra Leone and Liberia, the concept of 'civilisation' is now closely connected to modernisation and membership in a globalised world, yet its early connotations persist through the value given to higher education and the mastery of English.

Furthermore, the presence of settlers resulted in an early association between social and geographical mobility. The colonial territory was divided, and its spaces were ordered in a social hierarchy that opposed the rural to the urban. The colony of Sierra Leone, from its inception, was circumscribed by the physical geography of Freetown and its peninsular surroundings. Although creole traders travelled into the interior, contacts between the settlers and autochthonous populations beyond the colony were limited. As British colonial

authorities established a Protectorate over the interior in 1898, sociocultural and political divergences between inhabitants of the colony and the populations of the Protectorate were accentuated. In Liberia, the state was highly centralised, but effective control over the interior was not established until the beginning of the twentieth century. Even then, autochthonous populations had no right to citizenship, to own property or to vote, while the administration and higher political positions were concentrated in Monrovia. Only during the regime of President Tubman, in the 1950s, did the state introduce more inclusive policies. In both cases, the geographical and administrative divide performatively maintained a social dichotomy in which the social distinction between 'civilised' and 'native' had geographical reality. 'Civilisation' was linked to the settlers' regimes and located in urban areas along the coast. Consequently, the logics of patrimonialism were spatially grounded. Fosterage – sending a child 'to town', either to an Americo-Liberian or Krio family, in the hope that the child would become a part of that family – was an important mechanism by which rural families attached themselves to the dominant group. In connecting remote areas to urban spaces, this practice opened economic and social opportunities. Similarly, mobility – or, at least, connections to the political 'centre' – became a requirement of political success and achievement of the status of 'big man' (in Sierra Leone) or 'boss man' (in Liberia) defined by his/her capacities to link up with higher spheres and redistribute wealth. In both countries, the capital appeared as the site of 'civilisation' where acquisition of enhanced social status would connect a person to values situated in the transnational field. As illustrated in the contributions presented here, those representations continue to inform contemporary ideas about im/mobility, including the norms of social achievement and the social value attributed to certain spaces.

At the same time, being mobile (or aspiring to mobility) reactivates and actualises those representations by adding contemporary layers of meaning to them. Destination countries often have historical links with sending countries, as the United States has for Liberia, and Britain has for Sierra Leone. From this perspective, aspirations are directed primarily at certain places. Lubkemann (2018) argues that the Liberian 'diasporicity' was not constructed as a temporal aspiration, a hope for the future, but as a spatialised aspiration: freed slaves who went to Liberia in the nineteenth century crafted a 'back-to-Africa' narrative in response to racial violence in the United States, and foregrounded "an aspirational alternative that located the authentic and potential self in an 'elsewhere'" (ibid. 84). His analysis is relevant to present-day mobility dynamics. Aspiring to the western world, either by moving to that world, or by performing 'modernity' locally, *is* an act of identity that signals belonging to a 'modern'

global community, while constructing a narrative about the social inferiority of certain geopolitical spaces (Newell 2012; Ferguson 2006; Vigh 2006). Across West Africa, the absence of a foreseeable future means that “social being and becoming are imagined as only possible *elsewhere*, making migration a necessity in the pursuit of a worthy existence” (Vigh 2009: 103).

Yet, individual hopes and aspirations for improvement via migration are increasingly constrained by restrictive regimes of mobility (Kleist 2018; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). While the pathways to ‘old’ destinations may close, forcing people to reshape their migration projects, new spaces may open. In West Africa, destinations such as Dubai and China have become popular among small-scale businessmen. The new social arrangement of spaces, and hierarchies between them, recompose and diversify cross-border linkages. As individual’s trajectories pass through fragmented transnational social fields, they participate in reproducing, altering or subverting established ideas about ‘success’, as it is situated in time and specific spaces (Carling and Åkesson 2009).

4 Imaginary of Modernity, Scale and Aspirations

The imaginary of modernity, induced by transnational travel, new communication technologies and social media use, has generated multiple layers of interconnectedness between spaces ranging from the local to the global. Anthropologists have shown how media technologies can facilitate lives organised around movement and mobility. Innovative uses of mobile technologies in Africa, for instance, shape new forms of relatedness and induce rapid socio-economic changes (see de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh and Brinkman 2009, 2013). People can now ‘stay connected’ and maintain social relations across borders in a continuous way. Media technologies can also help immigrants create networks and generate new identities in their new place (Johnson 2013), forging new ‘ways of belonging’ in the transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Immigrants have also, in some cases, made extensive use of social media to craft a fantasised image of themselves, and often to mask disillusionment about their lives abroad (Ménard, this issue).

Media use not only shapes local aspirations, but also creates continuity between scales of mobility. King and Skeldon (2010: 1640) show that “internal and international mobilities create an integrated system, which can be observed at a range of scales: family/household, community, national, and the constellation of countries linked by migration flows.” International mobility often follows internal migration, structured by movements from rural to urban areas, and each space within the migratory path coincides with distinct expect-

tations of social change (Bedert, this issue). While local aspirations to ‘the West’ may be vague and nonspecific, they reveal a hierarchy in ‘dream’ destinations that reflect rising world inequalities (Bal 2014).

Yet, although international migration may often represent the ultimate promise of social mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013: 193), the articulation of geographical and social mobilities is not linear. As Ménard shows in her contribution, while migration to France may be valued as a route to socioeconomic self-improvement, Sierra Leonean migrants may nevertheless experience their situation as one of failure, at least by comparison with their earlier expectations of social mobility (higher education, well-paid jobs), which they located in anglophone countries. They compare their situation to the imagined success of others, which is largely staged on social media.

The imaginary of modernity, associated with globalisation, shapes individual projections of success into the future. The construction of local dreams follows specific ideas of ‘success’ in a context of ‘stratified globalisation’ (Kleist 2018) that concentrate social and economic opportunities in certain parts of the world. Local terrains are penetrated by mirages of capitalism and consumerism, often performed by migrants themselves, and this creates an appetite for ‘modern’ commodities and wealth. Aspirations to move may, however, also be “a metaphor for disappointment and disengagement” (Bal 2014: 3; see Ménard, this issue) in places that do not offer possibilities for self-realisation. Unfulfilled expectations nourish a longing for a better place – particularly among educated youth who have become disillusioned in their search for secure employment at home (Bal 2014; Mazzocchetti 2014). Enria’s contribution illustrates how to aspire to migration is not only to speak of future horizons, but also to question possibilities for social betterment in the present-day of a specific locale. The experiences of young men living in Freetown provoke them to critical reflection on their social, political and economic predicaments, a critique further informed by the discourses and imaginaries of those who have actually travelled to Europe via Libya. As Kleist notes (2018: 2), modern “visions of the good life” mobilise collective views on the topics of well-being and self-fulfilment. In their formulation of meaningful futures, individuals express hopes for collective improvement, whether this concerns the family, the community, the region, or the nation. For instance, Sierra Leoneans living in Europe, as Ménard shows, dearly hope that by displaying ‘success’ in diaspora spaces, they will help to upgrade the tarnished image of their home country on the international scene.

As illustrated by Enria’s contribution, West Africa’s successive crises – the civil wars of the 1990s, and more recently, the epidemic of Ebola Virus Disease – have undermined possibilities for the younger generation to imagine better

futures in their own countries. In contexts of uncertainty, migration appears as a way to break free from the youth status associated with a precarious livelihood and the inability to provide for a family (Vigh 2009). Young Bissau-Guineans, in Vigh's study, hope for social *becoming* via migration to places that they consider prosperous and technologically advanced. Places are compared and situated within a global hierarchy of countries characterised by rising inequalities (Kleist 2018: 4). On social media, for instance, Sierra Leoneans in the European diaspora very often compare the achievements of their successive governments with the ones of Kagame's regime in Rwanda, which they perceive as truly working 'for the people'. As in Liberia, common narratives in this case emphasise the resilience and patience of populations living in places of suffering and hardship. The experience of repetitive crises produces discourses of self-stigmatisation that convey the idea that 'anywhere is better than here'. Bedert describes how, in the local imaginary of mobility in Liberia, the 'here and now' become associated with a suffering that demands to be alleviated by the prospect of moving out and away. Suffering becomes an attribute of space, as people in Sierra Leone and Liberia often describe themselves as people 'who suffer'.

The articulation between aspirations and suffering constitutes a central aspect of the three contributions. On the one hand, the path towards social mobility is a path made of thorns, and suffering gives value to individual achievement (Bledsoe 1990; Bedert, this issue; Ménard, this issue). On the other hand, hardship and the lack of livelihood opportunities are often the reasons behind migration. Suffering makes people move, but movement also entails degrees of suffering. By moving, people enter a process in which they are put to the test. They have to demonstrate their ability to endure difficulties and to improve their situation. In this regard, the authors show how 'active waiting' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 11, di Nunzio 2015: 154–155) becomes a collective value indexed to social mobility. The mastery of 'active waiting' – that is, knowing how to wait productively, and to recognise and seize opportunities when they arise – demonstrates a person's abilities to transform one's life positively and find a way out of existential immobility (Hage 2009). Waiting is a critical strategy to transform being into social becoming (Vigh 2009).

Discourses on suffering thus show that emotions are also central to the imagination of im/mobility and link up different scales: the individual, the family, the community, and the nation (see also Kohl and Schroven 2014). Whether articulated by young urban residents in Freetown (Enria, this issue), migrants in the north of France aiming to move to the United Kingdom (Ménard, this issue) or local residents in rural Liberia (Bedert, this issue), those discourses speak to the experience of exclusion and to local aspirations of mobility.

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