What does it take to think of a “mobility-centred” social policy? 
Intersecting mobilities and social protection on the way towards a new research agenda

Abstract for a presentation at “The Migration Seminar”, MIM, University of Malmö, Sweden, February 2nd 2017

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Social security and statehood nowadays are frequently conflated, precisely because emerging, “Western” nation states have used a strategy to nationalise and territorialise both the space of the “social” and social security provisions. The main problem with conflating social security with statehood is that it naturalises a view of the nation state as a natural, exclusive home of a (sovereign and culturally bound) people forming a “flat” community of solidarity and comradeship within a self-contained territory. Amongst other, this led to an almost exclusive and naturalised understanding of social security and social rights as something originating from, existing in and activated by the nation state.

The predominant state-security nexus makes it difficult to deliberate on social policy in a progressive way. The reason for this that a view of this kind offers no perspective for people the state has categorised as “non-citizens”. Instead, such people become “problems”, even “threats”, that, along with the nation state itself, analysts and service providers cannot, will not – and should not – incorporate. However, even for de jure citizens, such rights and entitlements have been guaranteed if, and only if, they stay within the borders and moral boundaries of “their” nation state and if they are normatively defined as “good citizens” (Anderson 2013, 2–8) or “true members of the nation” (Wimmer 2002, 1).

To think and act beyond these limits in a world of increasing (im)mobilities and (in)security, we have to free ourselves from a state-centric perspective and notion of these concepts. Still a lot of the literature – even within this body of critical, progressive contributions – is characterised by an underlying assumption that everyone somehow should “have” citizenship in order to be “social” and thus receive social/state security. Some scholars are trying to establish a mobility-centred approach, but most are still trying to “include” “migrants” in the national community and have their needs met by national welfare policies that revolve around the citizen. In this way, even progressive discussions are still centred on “access”, but do not criticise the nation-state framework which creates “citizens” and “migrants”.

A mobilities perspective that incorporates No Borders studies in regard to the movement of people can address a number of rigidities which have to date obscured the dominant agendas in both political practice and scholarship. Moreover, it liberates us from the alluring and somewhat misleading category of “migrants” (Baines & Sharma 2002). It directs our attention towards the practices, regulations, infrastructures, moorings, systems or regimes that allow for differential movements and forms of mobile and immobile existences among all kinds of people, including by attaching certain qualities to (some) people, by merging them with objects and technologies, by tracing their movements or by allowing or hindering them to generate value from past movements. This implies sensitiveness towards, and rule in, their present national form.

Against this background, we can ask whether there are ways to think of “mobility-centred” forms of social protection, and, indeed, of social solidarity and social policy. Hence – and this might be the most challenging task – we need to move forward beyond a mere critique of existing social/state security and social policy. What is needed is a new research agenda that affects many existing fields.
The presentation at Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare, Malmö University, draws upon joint work between Nandita Sharma (University of Hawai‘i, US), Wolfgang Schröer (University of Hildesheim, GER) and Eberhard Raithelhuber (University of Salzburg, AUT), which will be published soon. Recently, this work in progress has been discussed with a number of colleagues during the international workshop “Intersecting Mobilities and Social Protection: Looking Out for a New Approach how to Do Research” in September 2016 in Salzburg.
Bio sketch

Dr. Eberhard Raithelhuber is a social scientist with a special emphasis on social work/social pedagogy and education. He has published on transitions in the life course, agency in social theory, social support and social intervention, youth and young adults, regional development and networks, social policy, citizenship and democracy, and transnationalism and migration. In October 2014 he took up a tenure track position as Assistant Professor at the Department of Educational Science, University of Salzburg, Austria. More: https://www.uni-salzburg.at/index.php?id=66237