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## **Communities on the move**

*Living as individuals in a mobile world*

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# Communities on the Move – Living as Individuals in a Mobile World

Malene Freudendal-Pedersen

Throughout modernity, individualization has changed the nature of communities in many ways – socially, spatially and culturally. »Individualization« has been a key concept in social sciences for a long time, and scholars have warned against the risks of anonymity and anomy. Increasing individualization has furthermore been connected to the rise in physical and virtual mobility. In short, individualization has been identified as the major driving force behind what has been called the erosion of communities and the weakening of social ties. The World Wide Web, on the other hand, has opened up new ways of defining who we are and what we want to be. Today, we spend large amounts of time online – on the computer at home or via smartphone in the public space. We return to the same online places regularly and participate in communities centered around what we experience individually



Abb. 1 Nature taking over

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and paradoxically at the same time together with friends and acquaintances. In his book »The Zero Marginal Cost Society« (2014), Jeremy Rifkin discusses the eclipse of capitalism due to the growing interest in the sharing economy. In his book, Rifkin refers to a survey that is of particular interest for my argument and which was conducted among 3.000 millennial consumers (born between 1981 and 2000) in the US. Of the 31 most preferred brands that the participants were asked to list, the top ten mainly consisted of internet firms. Car brands were completely missing. The car technology that widely has been considered a major force in the erosion of communities seems to have lost enormously of significance. Being able to drive a car at the age of 18 (16 in some places) used to have the function of a rite of passage into adulthood, freedom and interdependence. Today virtual platforms appear to be the more important technology. This does not mean, though, that we are no longer interested in physical mobility, i.e. meeting people face to face, or visiting places. On the contrary, this desire insists and the willingness to cover long distances in order to seek out opportunities and events has grown. The central shift concerns, I would argue, the need to own the required technology. Instead, having access seems to gain in importance, to share mobilities like we share music, films, knowledge, and so forth.

The theoretical framework informing my research is the mobilities paradigm which has rapidly grown within social sciences during the last 15 years. In public debate, »mobility« is most often understood as a synonym for »transport«. In contrast, the mobilities paradigm focuses not only on physical movement (transport) but also on virtual movement, on the plurality of mobilities that underlie the interconnectedness. This paradigm was first formulated by John Urry in his book »Sociology beyond societies« (2000). Urry argues that, in order to understand social life (economics, politics, culture), we need to move beyond the idea of society as a fixed container. In other words, with the increase in virtual and physical mobilities it becomes necessary to expand our perspectives in order to understand how societies today are produced and reproduced. Thus, people increasingly take it for granted that they will spend their holidays far from the place of their everyday lives, work life has become highly dependent on virtual interactions – often resulting in physical movement. And even if we do not travel physically, the virtual mobilities that

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come with smartphones, iPads, and portable computers play a determining role in everyday life choices, chores, and practices. As Ulrich Beck points out in his last book, »The metamorphoses of the World« (2016), even if we do not use or have access to iPads, smartphones, and travel, we still live in a world that is centered around mobilities; mobile global economic markets, for example, are influencing housing prices, news stories, food, and so forth. The mobilities turn shifts the focus away from an understanding

of communities exclusively as spatially fixed, in nation states, villages, and cities, emphasizing the significance of multiple identities one simultaneously forms in many communities. These communities emerge because people are continuously looking for other beings with whom to create meaning, share life experiences and responsibility. Virtual and physical mobilities simultaneously open up arenas of co-existence like various systems of sharing economy, dating sites, crowd sourcing, or protest movements.

**Abb. 2** Freedom?

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