

MUSINGS ON MOBILITY

Essays by Michael L. Sena

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MUSINGS ON MOBILITY essays touch on everything associated with why and how people move, the ways they get from where they are to where they want or need to be, and the infrastructure that sometimes enables and sometimes obstructs their movement. The author of these essays was trained and worked as an architect and urban planner, and then changed careers to work with the automotive manufacturing industry and its systems and service suppliers on designing, developing, and putting into use products and services that make driving safer, more secure, and more comfortable.

Is mobility a right or a privilege in a free society?

“Freedom of movement is the very essence of our free society; once the right to travel is curtailed, all other rights suffer.


William O. Douglas, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States (17 April 1939 – 12 November 1975)

THERE ARE MANY definitions for ‘mobility’, depending on the context. Upward mobility refers to a person’s ability to move up, unhindered, on the social ladder, although a good friend claims that upward mobility is one-half of the definition for an elevator. In Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto*, the Duke of Mantua sings “*La donna é mobile*”, ‘the woman is fickle’, meaning she feels free to move from one affair to another. Injuries or illnesses can cause a temporary or permanent lack of movement and loss of mobility. In the context of transportation, **mobility** is the physical, financial and social ability to go where you want or need to go, when you want or need to go, and by a means of your own choosing. Where you want to go may be within several minutes or hours of where you are, for example to get to work, to a store, or a doctor, or it can be to another part of the country or region in which you are living, or to a completely different country in order to find work or change your life.

I have added the clause “in a free society” to the title because, in my opinion, there are no rights in unfree societies, only privileges granted by those who have stolen everyone else’s rights. The definition of ‘right’ to which I refer is “something to which one has a just claim, such as the power or privilege to which one is justly entitled (e.g. voting rights or the right to decide which books to read or where to live).¹ The U.S. Bill of Rights, which comprise the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, clarifies the rights of Americans in relation to their government, guaranteeing civil rights and liberties to the individual, such as freedom of speech, press, and religion. There are now twenty-seven amendments to the U.S. Constitution, including the first ten. Amendments beyond the original ten put additional rights in writing, such as the abolishment of slavery and extending the right to vote to women. Probably the most important of all the amendments is the Ninth, which states: “*The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.*” In other words, just because we didn’t mention it when we wrote the Constitution, created the first Bill of Rights, and added seventeen more, it doesn’t mean it’s not a right.

‘Privilege’ is “a right granted as a benefit, advantage, or favor, especially one that is attached specifically to a position, an office, or

¹ “Right.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster. Accessed 27 April 2025.



one belonging to a group or class of individuals; prerogative.”² For example, in the United Kingdom, it was not until the Representation of the People Act of 1928 was passed that what had been a privilege of voting reserved only for men with property was made a right to all men and women over the age of 21. A privilege is something to which not all are entitled, while rights are, in theory, rights for everyone.

Justice Douglas had quite a bit of experience with exercising the right of freedom of movement. His father was an itinerant Presbyterian minister with Scottish ancestry who immigrated to America from Nova Scotia and settled in Minnesota, where Justice Douglas was born in 1898. The family moved to California, then Cleveland, Ohio and then Portland, Oregon during the first six years of the young Douglas’s life, when his father died, apparently without leaving much money for his wife and three children. His mother moved William and his two siblings from town to town working at odd jobs, and they finally settled in Yakima, Washington, a farming town in the middle of the state. William Douglas might have stayed in Yakima for the rest of his life if he had not been gifted with intelligence, which carried him to college on a full scholarship. When he graduated, he travelled across the country to New York City where he earned a law degree at Columbia University. He went on to Yale Law School in Connecticut, where he taught, and finally to Washington, DC to the Securities Exchange Commission after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and then to the Supreme Court to which he was nominated by FDR.

William O. Douglas, like many in his generation, the generation before, and the two generations after went to where the jobs were. Once they had a job, they made sure they set aside enough of their salaries to get themselves and their family members to wherever they needed to go. His intelligence, not wealth, was his ticket to a life of privileges, and there was nothing that kept him from using his right of movement to earn enough money to help him move from Yakima to the District of Columbia with many stops along the way. That was the case for almost everyone back then, during the first half of the 20th century. It wasn’t always that way.

When the term ‘freedom of movement’ was an oxymoron

Once upon a time, not so long ago, freedom of movement was a privilege enjoyed by few because few were free. Most people did not need to travel any meaningful distance from where they lived because they worked where they lived. And even if they wanted to travel, they were not allowed to do so unless it was for a pilgrimage or crusade. In agrarian societies, most people were legally tied to a place, first as slaves, then as serfs, then as laborers without title to the land they worked, and then as tenant farmers. Slaves had no rights or privileges. Serfs were given the privilege of living on a plot of land in return for growing, harvesting, and delivering the crops from the land and thereby earning protection from the

² “Privilege.” Op. cit.



lord who owned the land or who was granted the privilege of managing it for the overlord. Serfs needed permission from the lord for everything. Laborers were able to pick up and leave, but if they left, they didn't come back and all they could leave with was what they had on their backs. Even those who lived in cities and towns were there at the pleasure of the lords and nobles. They served or performed a task, and in their free time they went to church.

In spite of these rather severe restrictions on movement, approximately 60 million Europeans emigrated from their continent between 1492 and 1930, and more than 90% of them left after 1820. More than one-half of them went to the United States. The top people-exporting countries were Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Ireland, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Those who left also went in large numbers to Argentina, Canada, Brazil, and Australia. Everyone of us has an immigrant background if we go back far enough, including all the signers of the U.S. Constitution. We all have our stories of how our families moved and settled into the places where we were born. Here is one example.

My mother's fraternal ancestors, the Rosati family, had lived for over four centuries on a farm called Masseggio in the town of Sigillo in the Region of Italy called Umbria. They were laborers without title to the land they worked or the building in which they lived. The Rosati family was granted the privilege in perpetuity early in the 17th century to work the land at Masseggio, probably at a time when the Black Death gave the peasants who survived a bit of bargaining power over the land owners to move up the social ladder from serfdom. The condition for occupying the home was that a Rosati would reside in it and the land would be farmed. At the end of the 19th century, there were approximately forty members of the Rosati family, including my grandfather, living on the second floor of a two story stone structure, while the animals lived below providing extra heat during the cold winter months. For most of those four centuries, they were obligated to hand over the majority of their harvest to the Catholic Church because Umbria was part of the Papal States.

Serfdom was the status of many peasants under feudalism, specifically relating to manorialism and similar systems. It was a condition of debt bondage and indentured servitude. The serf was the worst fed and rewarded. However, unlike slaves, they had certain rights in land and property. The word serf originated from the Middle French serf and was derived from the Latin servus ("slave").

After the *Risorgimento* (the unification of Italy) in 1860, the ownership of Masseggio and everything and everyone on it was transferred to a noble loyal to the King. Nevertheless, the agreement with the Rosati family seems to have held during those four centuries, and the family had no reason to move, no means to do so and nowhere to go if they did.

Perhaps it was a premonition that this relationship of mutual dependency between the Rosati family and the landowner would come to an end that led the family to send one of its members out into the world to earn a separate living, of course with the objective of sending the money he earned back to Masseggio. My grandfather departed Masseggio in 1900 at the age of fourteen for Sardinia to work in the coal mines. Two years later he moved to Luxembourg, also for work in the mines. He, along with his wife Rosa

Notari—who also lived in Sigillo and whom he married in 1909 and took to Luxembourg—and with the first two of their four children (my mother and her younger sister were born in America), made it to America before both Italy and America entered WWI and before the Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 was passed which restricted the numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans who could enter the country. When in America, my grandfather had the right to work (back into the coal mines), buy property, build a home, obtain a driver’s license, buy a car, and become a citizen, all this while he continued to send money to his family in Sigillo. His and Rosa’s children had the right to attend school, vote when they reached voting age, travel and live wherever they wished. This wasn’t the case for all Americans at the time.

When they turned rights into privileges and people fought back

Another Rosa, Rosa Parks (born McCauley), was born in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1913 and raised on a farm in Pine Level, Alabama. Her maternal grandparents were former slaves who had been freed on the 1st of January 1863 by the Emancipation Proclamation issued as an Executive Order by President Abraham Lincoln, and made official law with the passing and final ratification of the 13th Amendment on the 6th of December 1865. Rosa’s parent’s ancestors did not emigrate from Africa seeking a new and better life. When Rosa was growing up she had the right to attend a segregated all-black school. While white students were driven to school on school buses, black children, including Rosa, walked or rode public buses. Rosa and other descendants of slaves had the right to ride on public buses, but they did not have the privilege of sitting in the front part of the buses where white people sat because they were black. This privilege was withheld from them by so-called Jim Crow laws.



Above, Rosa Parks riding a Montgomery Transit Bus after bus segregation was declared unconstitutional, and a segregated bus below.



In 1955, when Rosa Parks was 42 years old, she decided that she would challenge that law. She sat in a seat reserved as a privilege of whites only (See sidebar). It was like the “shot heard around the world”, which were the first shots fired at the battles of Lexington and Concord that were the start of the American Revolutionary War. Her action triggered the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. The year before, the Supreme Court, with Justice Douglas still sitting, had ruled unanimously in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. Why not on buses or all public facilities? A boycott of the city’s buses was proposed and agreed to by the associations representing the interests of the black community. The boycott had three demands: 1) courteous treatment by bus operators, 2) passengers seated on a first-come, first-served basis, and 3) black people would be employed as bus operators.

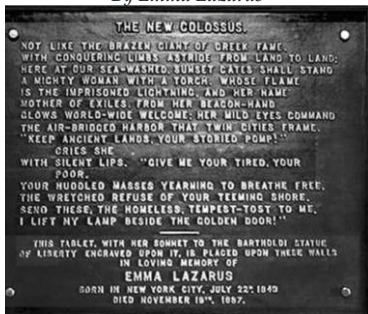
The boycott lasted thirteen months. In the eleventh month, the Supreme Court upheld a district court’s ruling that segregation laws for buses were unconstitutional. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who was the pastor of a church in Montgomery at the time, was one of the leaders of the boycott. He later wrote that “a



The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes com-
 mand
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries
 she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your
 poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

A sonnet to the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty
 By Emma Lazarus



miracle had taken place. Instead of riding buses, boycotters organized a system of carpools, with car owners volunteering their vehicles or themselves driving people to various destinations. Some white housewives also drove their black domestic servants to work. When the city pressured local insurance companies to stop insuring cars used in carpools, the boycott leaders arranged policies at Lloyd's of London."³ The buses began rolling again. Rosa and her husband, who was a barber on a military base, lost their jobs because of their involvement in the boycott. They could not find other jobs in Montgomery, so they moved their family to Detroit, Michigan. Detroit was still a growing city and reached the peak of its population a few years later. There were plenty of jobs to be had. Rosa worked as a piecework seamstress in a garment factory for five years, and then was hired as a secretary and receptionist for U.S. Representative John Conyers, where she worked until she retired. She died in Detroit in 2005 at the age of 92.


It has gotten much more difficult to be mobile these days

There was a time, not so long ago, that it seemed like everyone had gained the right to move when and to where they liked. Justice Douglas was still sitting on the Supreme Court when the Rosati grandchildren, including yours truly, were ready to start their journeys into adulthood in the middle of the 1960s, and when Martin Luther King witnessed the signing of the Civil Rights Act. (Rosa Parks should have been invited.) The words in Emma Lazarus's sonnet to the Statue of Liberty resonated with those who entered through Ellis Island, like the Senas and the Rosatis, and with (most, but not all) of the people already on the shores who welcomed them. Jobs were still located in places where everyone could reach them, even without access to an automobile. It wasn't quite the same in Europe, although the result was similar. Great Britain, France, Belgium, and The Netherlands allowed, and even encouraged, people in their colonies, both present and past, to come to their countries. A large number of "Asians"⁴ came to Great Britain in 1972 when I lived there, 27,000 in all. They had been expelled by Idi Amin from Uganda.

The welcome mats for the laborers from southern and eastern Europe and from Asia had been pulled in when the rough labor was no longer needed for building railroads and mining coal. Ellis Island closed in 1954. The jobs that could be done by cheap labor in the southern states was being replaced by machines or moved further south or to Asia. Gradually, the jobs that attracted the black workers from the south to the north moved as well. The Do Not Enter signs started going up around the time that freedom of movement for everyone was being confirmed in the courts. Riots began, first in 1965 in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, and in 1967 in Newark and Rosa Parks' Detroit, mostly because the courts had been glacially slow with their confirmations of the

³ Finkleman, Paul (2009). Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present. Oxford University Press. p. 360. ISBN 9780195167795. (in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montgomery_bus_boycott#cite_note-32)

⁴ Asians referred to people from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.



rights of non-whites. There were other reasons, like the over representation of young black men in the ranks of forces fighting in Vietnam against people who were also attempting to gain their own freedoms. This is when people began to lose faith and trust in their governments to do what was best and what was right.

Bread and circus

Gradually, the world order has reverted to being one in which meaningful mobility has become a privilege of the wealthy, and frivolous mobility has become the circus for the masses. Meaningful mobility is being able to pick up stakes and move to where there are opportunities, as well as being able to get to any place in the vicinity of where you live. Frivolous mobility is a cheap, all-inclusive weekend package to Las Vegas where your meals are subsidized, but the drinks and the betting is intended to empty your pockets.

Today, the Rosati family might not have been able to immigrate to America, and Rosa Parks and her family might not have been able to pick up stakes in Alabama and move to a state where there were jobs to be had and black people were not discriminated against in the way they were in Dixie states. Immigration laws are getting tighter everywhere, not just in the U.S. but in all western countries. One unfortunate side effect of this, which I have not seen discussed anywhere, is the direct and negative impact it has on the least socially and economically mobile people who are living in places where those who are fortunate enough to be mobile have already left. When the immigrants came, they occupied the homes and apartments that the former inhabitants were leaving for places where there were better opportunities, or to the suburbs where there was better housing and more space. Those immigrants, including both my fraternal and maternal grandparents, provided a market of buyers and renters, and the money they paid provided the means for those who wanted or needed to move to be able to make their move.

Detroit's biggest problem after it had lost a third of its population since its peak in 1960 was and remains all the empty, abandoned homes that people have been forced to leave because they cannot sell them. No one will buy them. And if you can't take a stake with you to a place where there are jobs, like California or Texas, you have no chance of finding a place to live. You are stuck. You are not mobile. You do not have freedom of movement.

You don't treat a pimple by cutting it off

Problems with mobility are not like scratches on the skin, ailments that can be cured with an antibiotic and a bandaid. They are like pimples, which cannot be healed by cutting them off and treating them like a surface scratch.⁵ They must be fixed at the roots. The car pools during the Montgomery bus strike did not solve the

⁵ I have borrowed this analogy from George Orwell, who said in his 1940 on Charles Dickens that "Dickens never imagined that you can cure pimples by cutting them off. In every page of his work one can see a consciousness that society is wrong somewhere at the root. It is when one asks 'Which root?' that one begins to grasp his position".



unjust treatment of black people on or off the city's buses. If it had, there would still be car pools in Montgomery. Right? It took legal action and court decisions and real enforcement of the laws, and we are still not there yet. It opened up seats on the buses to black riders, but these measures did not solve the problem of mobility or racial discrimination at their roots.⁶ The mobility problem is not solved by spending more public money on public transportation because the source of the problem is that the right to freedom of movement has never been acknowledged—except with lip service—and we have done more damage to mobility by making cars more expensive for safety and environmental reasons, by restricting affordable residential development in places where there are jobs using the cover of environmental protection, by decades of government policies that encouraged the exporting of jobs and allowed the off-shoring of profits.

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Justice Douglas must have meant “freedom of movement” figuratively, not literally, when he said “once the right to travel is curtailed, all other rights suffer”, because there is nothing that he did during his tenure as a Supreme Court justice to make physical movement more of a right than a privilege. He argued for freedom of speech, against abuse of accused prisoners, and determined that “trees have standing”, but there is nothing in his record to recommend him as an advocate of freedom to move as his family had done and as he had done to achieve is position.

Mobility should be a right, but it is still a privilege

Mobility is more of a privilege today than it was one hundred years ago. With all due respect to Justice Douglas (he served on the Supreme Court and I have not) he was wrong. He had the order of rights reversed. If a person does not have the right to meaningful work, and the right to an affordable, decent, and safe place to live, the right to movement is meaningless. That is the root of the problem of mobility. The pimple, what we see above the surface, is what we keep trying to fix. We have to stop cutting off pimples to cure the social and economic problems that ail us. We are making attempts to address and solve the affordable rides problem, but that, on its own, is not enough. Mobility should be a right, but putting it on a list of amendments to a constitution without first making jobs and shelter rights is simply hypocritical political grandstanding.



⁶ “Sixty years after Parks' arrest sparked the historic boycott to end racial segregation on Montgomery's buses, the overwhelmingly black ridership of Montgomery's bus system no longer faces legalized racial segregation -- but they face a bus system that advocates call inadequate.” NBC 15 News. November 30th 2015. (<https://mynbc15.com/news/local-15-today/60-years-after-boycott-using-montgomery-bus-can-be-trying>)

About Michael L. Sena

Through my writing, speaking and client work, I have attempted to bring clarity to an often-opaque world of highly automated and connected vehicles. I have not just studied the technologies and analyzed the services. I have developed and implemented them and have worked to shape visions and followed through to delivering them. What drives me—why do what I do—is my desire to move the industry forward: to see accident statistics fall because of safety improvements related to advanced driver assistance systems; to see congestion on all roads reduced because of better traffic information and improved route selection; to see global emissions from transport eliminated because of designing the most fuel-efficient vehicles; and to see everyone who needs a ride get one.

I put vehicles into their context. It is not just roads; it is communities, large and small. Vehicles are tools, and people use these tools to make their lives and the lives of their family members easier, more enjoyable, and safer. Businesses and services use these tools to deliver what people need. Transport is intertwined with the environment in which it operates, and the two must be developed in concert.



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