



Motion squared

A second look at the concept of social navigation

Henrik Vigh

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Serving as a metaphor for practice, the concept of navigation has become increasingly popular in anthropological theory. The concept seems to have almost sneaked its way into our analytical vocabulary; it is used when referring to how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances and in describing how they disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions. Yet, despite its increasing popularity, the concept is most often used in an unspecified or misunderstood manner – it is generally not well defined! Building on prolonged fieldwork in Bissau, West Africa, and with West African migrants in Lisbon, Portugal, I take a second look at the concept of social navigation, clarifying the notion as an analytical optic, discarding the most unfortunate misconceptualizations of the term and elucidating the contribution that the concept can make to our understanding of the way people act in their social worlds.

Key Words

interactivity • power • practice and space • social navigation

UNSTABLE POINTS OF DEPARTURE

We most often encounter the concept of navigation, in the social sciences, when dealing with situations of social volatility and opacity. It enters into our analytical vocabulary through descriptions of practice in unstable places and contexts of insecurity and/or rapid social change (see, for example, Evans and Furlong, 1997: 17–19; Honwana, 2000: 77; Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 878; Appadurai, 2004; Mertz, 2002: 265; Vigh, 2006a, 2006b). The concept springs to mind when looking at how people move in uncertain circumstances and is referred to in academic debates when focusing on the way agents act in difficult situations, move under the influence of multiple forces or seek to escape confining structures. However, though increasingly mentioned, the concept is rarely defined or theorized. Rather than being elaborated into an analytical optic, it serves as an image-generating metaphor for illuminating social practice in specific circumstances. Within this article I will make its implicit value explicit. I will move the concept of

'navigation' from the map (Gell, 1985; Hutchins, 1995; Ingold, 2000) onto the social environment (Vigh, 2006a) and demonstrate its theoretical and heuristic value for an anthropological analysis of practice.

THE THIRD DIMENSION

I want to start by stating the obvious, namely that 'navigation' literally means 'to sail'. The term is etymologically related to the Latin *navigare*, meaning 'to sail, sail over and go by sea', and thus defines a special form of movement: that is, the way we move in a moving environment. 'Navigation' is, in this perspective, counterposed to the way we move in fields and landscapes. Rather than designating movement across a hardened, solidified surface, it designates motion within fluid and changeable matter. The concept, in other words, highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along. As such, the concept adds a third dimension to our understanding of movement and mobility. Where we normally look either at the way social formations move and change over time, or the way agents move within social formations, navigation allows us to see the intersection – or rather interactivity (cf. Jensen, 1998)¹ – between the two.

As an analytical concept social navigation is, thus, interesting as it grants us an alternative perspective on practice and the intersection between agency, social forces and change. By highlighting the *interactivity* of practice and the *intermorphology* of motion, it grants us an analytical optic which allows us to focus on how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change. However, social navigation is not just theoretically interesting but also empirically so. People invest a great deal of time in making sense of and predicting the movement of their social environment, in clarifying how they are able to adapt to and move in relation to oncoming change. We are all constantly engaged in coping with social pressures and taking the influence of these pressures into consideration in relation to present possibilities and envisioned trajectories. In other words, though the radical interactivity that the concept highlights is a theoretical perspective, the fact that our social environments are in (sometimes rapid and uncontrollable) motion is part of everyday life. We act, adjust and attune our strategies and tactics in relation to the way we experience and imagine and anticipate the movement and influence of social forces.

In illuminating how exactly we do so I want to take an empirical point of departure.² The premise of moving environments as the context of our own movement can be empirically found in a range of social settings and situations. Social navigation exists as a vernacular around the world, which is what I will now turn my attention to.

AN EVERYDAY OF NOISE

Since the year 2000 I have spent the equivalent of two years doing fieldwork in Bissau, the capital of the small West African country of Guinea-Bissau, researching the way young urban men seek to survive socially and physically in this impoverished and conflict-stricken country. Bissau is distinguished, as its inhabitants say, by the constant 'noise' (*barrulho*) of warfare, dispute and suffering and the relentless rumors of conflict. Seen from within Bissau, calm and quiet seems to belong to other times and places as

the country has, since 1999, seen five coups or coup attempts, numerous purges and several outbreaks of fighting. The small, dilapidated capital is a sub-regional centre of chronic political instability.

Furthermore, adding to the insecurity, Bissau currently stands as a 'major trans-shipment point for drug traffickers bringing cocaine from South America to Europe'.³ It has become 'Africa's first narco-state',⁴ its internal lawlessness being now felt on a global scale. Yet, though the drugs trade has increased the wealth of the city's minute elite, it has not brought with it a generalized surge in wealth. What we are currently witnessing in Bissau is rather an increased dependency on 'pedra', as crack cocaine is called, among the city's impoverished population, and a surge in drug-related local crime, adding an extra element of uncertainty to even kin relationships and family solidarity. The burden of criminality is as unequally distributed as assets so that, for a large part of the people I have spoken to in the city, uncertainty has gained an air of constancy. With social relationships being built on a background of rampant poverty and political processes being in the hands of a tiny elite, changes seem, for the majority of the city's inhabitants, to involve an uncontrollable sequence of events; from conflicts, to rising food prices and an epidemic of drug dependency, the city's inhabitants find their lives set in a social environment of flux greatly influencing their well-being, social possibilities and life chances. Recent change has, in other words, merely added to the misery and made social life an uncontrollable succession of negative socio-political and economic developments (Vigh, 2006b). It is a city characterized by volatile political change, economic hardship, insecurity and uncertainty, making life a constant struggle to deal with 'the actualities of a desperately disturbed everyday life' (Guyer, 2007: 410).

FROM RADICAL EVENTS TO RADICAL CONTINUITIES

The 'everyday' in the city is, in this perspective, not akin to the taken-for-granted version of 'life as usual' that we are accustomed to see the everyday as.⁵ Rather, it swings in tune with its proximity to disorder. Its most minute rhythms are overlapped by larger temporal rhythms. Morning rituals, afternoon chats, greetings and routines merge with larger frameworks; at the first sign of trouble or anticipation of political conflict, the pitch and tone of already intense discussions change, the constant alertness to escape routes out of town heightens and securing necessary provisions becomes prominent as people anticipate short-rationing. That is not to suggest that everything in Bissau is adrift and afloat. There are, in fact, a multitude of both cultural and social institutions that seem relatively stable and enduring, one of which, ironically, is the existential uncertainty caused by the dire economic situation and political unrest. As drastic, often conflictual, socio-political change is relatively common in Bissau (Vigh, 2006a), societal turbulence and its social manifestations become everyday. They constitute the presumed and anticipated continuity of the inhabitants' social environment. For the Guineans I speak with – both in relation to my fieldwork in Bissau and among illegal migrants in Lisbon (see Vigh, 2009)⁶ – life is characterized by a tenacious struggle to get by in the face of persistent hardship. Their everyday lives are set between an immediate struggle to secure themselves the next meal, find the next job and survive the present, and an unceasing attempt to figure out a way of gaining viable life chances, social worth and recognition. Yet both endeavors are related to situations in which emergent networks, contacts and events may provide people with ways out of the difficulties of their present

positions, which is why, in the midst of the certain uncertainty and predictable instability, social life is surveyed, assumptions critically assessed and action tactile and tentative. As people say when monitoring the political developments of the city, *no ta djubi situason so* ('we are just looking at the situation'). Yet, 'just looking' is not, in fact, as passive as it sounds as it is directed toward an uncompromising awareness of socio-political movements in order to anticipate oncoming problems and assess possibilities of action: it refers to a persistent alertness to the relationship between one's reading of the unfolding political process, its oncoming movement and different possible ways of reacting to it.

In this context of instability, the everyday humdrum of acts and interpretations is substituted by an everyday of 'noise', of persistent social disruption and stagnant poverty, entailing that interpretations and practices become focused on the volatile productions of a tremulous social environment and the uncertain consequences of a range of possible outcomes and disruptions. Everyday life in Bissau is a world of uncertainty (cf. Whyte, 1997), of anticipated yet uncontrollable difficulties and hardship. It stands as a good example of what Taussig (1992) has called 'the nervous system' in which societal movement becomes motion without progress and social life is characterized by a constant unease and attention towards change in the shape of possible acts of power and social forces. Taussig's argument is complex and the beauty of the concept often seems to evade the reader as it is built around a twin focus. The 'nervous system' refers both to a system that is out of balance, shaky and uneasy (that is, a system that acts in a nervous manner), as well as to the nervous system as a sensory faculty, constantly focused on movement and necessarily feeling its way through unsettled environments. In this manner Taussig succeeds in illuminating the general social characteristics of situations of prolonged distress and uncertainty, and in granting us a vista from where we are able to see how chronic social crisis creates an unsettled social orientation and awareness that is hyper-attentive to real and imaginary stimuli (Vigh, 2009).

SOCIAL VIGILANCE

Life lived in the nervous shadow of social uncertainty, poverty and conflict can both be hard to describe and hard to grasp for those of us lucky enough to be born into affluent and stable worlds. What seems to be a general characteristic in such situations is the manner in which social and political life is constantly monitored and scrutinized. Life in Bissau is lived on shifting ground and doing ethnographic fieldwork in such a situation one quickly becomes aware that people are constantly preoccupied with predicting and foreseeing the unfolding of the political and economic environment. They spend a great deal of time debating how global, regional and local influences and conflicts will affect their lives, what spaces of possibility will emerge or disappear, what trajectories will become possible and what hopes and goals can be envisioned.

Tellingly, such predictions of the unfolding future have both within theory and lived life, until now, predominantly been confined to the realm of economics in the North (see Arnoldi, 2004; Guyer, 2007; Leyshon and Thrift, 2007). Our consolidated societal structures, local political stability and global political position have been perceived as so dominant and durable that the last few decades have not seen the need to constantly assess and reassess socio-political movement; we have not been forced by circumstance to anticipate oncoming disruptions and political fluctuation but have been able to afford merely to speculate in economic futures and trends. This seems to be changing in

relation to the current economic crisis, the influence and impact of globalization and, not least, the uncertainty caused by the consequences and prospects of climate change. As such, the analytical expedience of the concept of social navigation is likely to grow in the near future. Yet, despite the above factors of change, we presently still seem to take the stability of our socio-political formation for granted and conceptualize it through an imagery of hardened and solidified surfaces and structures. Contrarily, social life in Bissau parades a constant attentiveness to change and movement. People are continually taking bearings with respect to changes in the socio-political environment and constantly seeking to make the best of emergent social possibilities in order to direct their lives in an advantageous direction. It clarifies a flexible and adaptive practice constantly attuned to the movement of the environment people's lives are set in: a practice which in Guinean Creole goes under the term of *dubriagem*.

SHADOWBOXING

I first encountered the concept of *dubriagem* when talking to Pedro and Justino about their life possibilities in light of the miserable economic and political state of the country. Pedro and Justinho were painting a picture for me of the hardships that saturated their existence, the strain of political conflict, of retrenchment and unemployment: of unremitting uncertainty. As I asked what they did to survive, how they got by and found resources, a word surfaced which I had not heard before. As I interrupted, asking about this unfamiliar word, they responded in unison: *Dubria, dubria*.⁷ Pedro was moving his upper body in a disjointed yet rhythmical sway. He looked somewhat like he was shadowboxing: arms along his side, weaving and bobbing his torso back and forth as though dodging invisible pulls and pushes. He repeated: '*Bu ta dubria, dubria. Dubria!*' 'You *dubria* . . . it's movement, dynamism, *dynamismo*. You *dubria* . . . so that you can see your life', Justinho added.

I subsequently encountered the term a myriad times while doing fieldwork, in Bissau as well as among Guinean migrants in Europe. In both situations the word is commonly accompanied by the characteristic sway of the upper body that I described above. At first I found the movement puzzling. It distracted my attention from the words being used to describe the term. Yet after a while it dawned on me that it was an embodiment of the concept itself. What my informants were moving and shifting their torsos in relation to, I realized, was the push and pull of social forces – not as static constraints or positions of power in a social field but as social effects that engage social beings and bodies within the social environment in question. 'Us blacks', said Rasta, an illegal migrant in Lisbon, 'we must stay attentive [*no ten ku fica attentivo*], we must *dubria*. If you do not *dubria* you will fall [*kai*].' To fall is to be rendered passive: to have the world act upon you rather than to act in relation to the way it engages you (see Jackson, 1998, 2008).

Dubria is, as such, directly related to movement. It designates a certain way of surviving in uncertain circumstance. Yet the concept refers to more than just survival and is directed both towards making one's way through immediate difficulties as well as directing one's life positively into the future. You must *dubria* in order to 'see your life' or to 'see your future',⁸ people say, accentuating the relationship between their immediate struggle and their attempts to secure themselves an existence in a space where positive futures are not pre-given and cannot be planned with certainty, and where the movement

of the social environment is taken into consideration at every stage of action. *Dubriagem*, as the term's infinitive is called, thus reveals itself, at a closer look, as encompassing both the spatial and the temporal awareness needed to move and position oneself expediently within a tumultuous terrain.⁹

EMPIRICAL ANALOGIES

As I was unable to find the term in the Portuguese language, I initially thought that the concept was unique to Creole. Though being a former Portuguese colony, and Portuguese Creole being the lingua franca of the country, the words *dubria* or *dubriagem* apparently do not exist in Portuguese, or at least not any longer, but translate instead into *desenrascar*, that is, to disentangle or to free of difficulty.¹⁰ However, I was to find out that the concept has a parallel in the French phrase *se débrouiller*,¹¹ meaning, to get by or get the best out of a situation (Reed-Danahay, 1996: 63–4),¹² related to the substantive *débrouillardise*, referring to the ability to get by. Etymologically, the word is related to *brouillard*, or fog,¹³ and has a maritime use, meaning 'to clear up', as the cloud or fog drifts away,¹⁴ expressive of the use of *dubriagem* in gaining clarity in one's life, as shown in the quotes above. Seeing one's life or future through the act of *dubria* thus allows one to gain a perspective on which way the social environment is moving and how this movement influences one's course towards both the near and distant future. It designates the ability to envision one's way through emergent and volatile socio-political circumstances as well as being the actual practice of doing so.

The meaning behind the concept of *dubriagem* is, in other words, not unique to Creole. In fact, similar notions seem to exist in a wide range of communities and societies, as seen in the concepts of *desenrascar* and *se débrouiller*. In the English language we can thus talk about *muddling through* as a notion that describes the act of coping more or less successfully with a situation that we are not very sure of. Similarly, in the Danish language the terms *at møffe* and *at sno sig* spring to mind, denoting much the same type of practice, with a special emphasis on making one's way through tangible but unspecified social constraints. Equally, both the concepts of *dubriagem* and *se débrouille* bear resemblance to the Brazilian practice of *Jeitinho* as 'a way of accomplishing a goal . . . by using . . . informal social and personal resources' (Barbosa, 1995: 36). Common to all three terms is an emphasis on flexibility and tactics. Coupling the idea of navigation with a conceptual dichotomy from De Certeau (1988), we can say that strategy is the process of demarcating and constituting space and tactics the process of navigating it.¹⁵ That is, rather than simply denoting demarcative and constitutive strategic action, all of the above concepts direct our attention towards the tactical practice of navigating social forces and events.

Dubriagem is, as such, akin to the embodied, practical knowledge of *metis*, described so wonderfully by James Scott as a practice centered on 'a knack' or 'cunning' (Scott, 1998: 331), the qualities needed to make the best of emerging problems and possibilities. Yet *dubriagem* is, significantly, not confined to the present. Though it may, at first encounter, seem like a practice related to the immediate, it is in fact equally directed towards both the near and the distant future as the practice of moving along an envisioned, yet frail and tentative, trajectory in an unstable environment. And acknowledging that, for a great number of people around the world, the social environment is not experienced as stable or static but as an unfolding process requires that we analyse

practice in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that tactics and strategies (cf. De Certeau, 1988) are constructed and actualized in, and constantly attuned to, a shifting terrain and its imagined and anticipated configurations. Social action in Bissau is plotted, and tactics are generated, in the knowledge that the field of enactment is neither solid nor stable but shifting and fluid.

ANALYTICAL ANALOGIES

In a recent book, I translated and elaborated the vernacular concept of *dubria* into social navigation (Vigh, 2006a), emphasizing interactivity as the key aspect of practice. Similar to the bodily movement that accompanies the term *dubria* in Bissau, the term navigation is, in Northern Europe, often followed by an identical sway of the hand indicating much the same interaction with oncoming movement or forces. I will not repeat the entire argument here but stress the main points, namely, that we organize ourselves and act in relation to the interplay of the social forces and pressures that surround us, and that social navigation designates the practice of moving within a moving environment. Due to the intersection of the multiple factors constituting it, our social environment is always emergent and unfolding, in consequence requiring of the agent the capacity to 'adapt' and 'read' 'capricious environments' (Scott, 1998: 331). Because navigation designates motion within motion, it forces us, in a social perspective, to consider the relation between the environment people move in and how the environment itself moves them, before, after and during an act. Social navigation, in this manner, adds an extra dimension to practice as we become able to focus on the way people's movement in their social environments is constantly attuned and adjusted to the unfolding of the environment itself and the effect this has on possible positions and trajectories. The concept clarifies a practice imbued with the 'flexibility and "preadaptation" necessary for unpredictable change' (Bateson, 1972: 495).

Social navigation, in this perspective, encompasses both the assessment of the dangers and possibilities of one's present position as well as the process of plotting and attempting to actualize routes into an uncertain and changeable future. Were we to restrict it to the present, the concept would merely be an act related to social stimulus – a mechanical, singular movement. Yet, because of the logic of the radical interactivity of 'motion within motion', it always contains 'the reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world' (Guyer, 2007: 409).

The concept is, in this perspective, similar to Michael D. Jackson's notion of 'maneuvering', which reintroduces a cybernetic perspective on practice highlighting a constant striving for balance and control understood as a 'dialectic in which persons vie and strategize in order to avoid nullification' (Jackson, 1998: 26). Jackson's concept of maneuvering eloquently directs our attention towards the immediate – or short term – practical engagement with the forces that move us and move around us. However, navigation encompasses a denser temporality, as it is constantly attuned both to the way we move in the here and now as well as to the way we move in relation to social goals and prospective positions. In this manner, navigation is, importantly, related to movement through both the socially *immediate* and the socially *imagined*. It designates the complex of actions and interpretations that enable one to act in the here and now,

gain an idea of the possible routes and courses that emerge from the present and direct one's movement expediently toward possible futures.

The point is, in other words, that these aspects of action are not separated and sequential when navigating, but are in simultaneous dialogue. They stand within the multidimensionality and density of the social, never in isolation. When navigating we seek to act in and through immediate changeable circumstances as well as move toward positions in the yet to come – articulated in unison as hopes and dreams. As such, social navigation is to plot, to actualize plotted trajectories and to relate one's plots and actions to the constant possibility of change. Yet it must be emphasized that as we move in our social world our horizons change around us, affecting both our vistas (and hence points of view) and our attainable social positions (see Vigh, 2006a). In a social scientific perspective, the term navigation, thus, gains strength from being capable of encompassing some of the denser, yet analytically elusive, dimensions of social action. It counters our usual conceptualization of action as being performed on, and out from, unwavering ground and adds a third dimension to social movement. As an analytic optic the concept tunes in to the movement of the social environment and the movement of agents within it as well as the relationship between the two.

MOTION AND FIELDS

In this manner, the concept of social navigation joins two separate social scientific perspectives on movement, that is, the movement and change of social formations and societies, and the movement and practice of agents within social formations. We have for a long time pondered the way social formations change and move over time in a *diachronic* perspective; one could even say that this is – and has been – the primary focus of the social scientific macro perspective since social evolutionism and Darwinism. We have also spent a great deal of time looking, in a *synchronic* micro-perspective, at the way agents move at a given point in time within social forces and formations. Yet, when we look at the way agents act and move within their social environments we often forget, for some reason, to take the movement of the social environment into consideration.¹⁶

One of the scholars who did have an eye for the relation between the two is Pierre Bourdieu. Striking a dialogue between agency and social forces, the concept of navigation could be perceived to be merely an odd version of the concept of praxis. Yet, it is when focusing on people's attempts at sketching and actualizing social trajectories in an environment marked by volatile change, such as the Bissauian, that the concept of navigation reveals itself as an analytical optic that has an edge over its peers. Within the shifting and fluid circumstances of warfare and social turmoil navigation provides us, as said, with an image of socio-political action as having to be attentive to the constant currents, shifts, pulls and undertows of societal (mis)dynamics – to the large scale or small scale changes that affect one's movement and possibilities, not just while planning action but equally in the very process of acting. When navigating, we have to direct our attention towards immediate social flows and shifts, as well as to how these influence our positions and possibilities, where and how these move and affect us and the point we are moving towards.

In this perspective the concept departs from Bourdieu's body of theory in relation to his focus on both practice and social forces; more specifically, the divergence is located in the speed and acceleration of change and his idea of socio-cultural fields and

formations. In fact, Bourdieu's work builds on an underlying idea of relatively stable class-structured states: he shows how people are constituted and positioned and how they move within their social environment, but he does so primarily with stable ground as an implicit premise. This becomes no clearer than in his use of the analogy of games to designate socio-political action (Bourdieu, 1984, 1994; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001),¹⁷ in which a field is a demarcated space, identified by the forms of stakes (or capital) being played for, the rules being played by and the demarcation being played on. The spatial image conveyed is a general one of a bounded, striated and relatively solidified (or at best slowly changing) surface or structure. Furthermore, for the game analogy to work at all we need to see the field as a defined and clearly isolated social space with a set of positioned and defined players and rules. In other words, even though, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 85) states himself, the structures of relations within social fields differ from games, as they are not consciously constructed and prearranged,¹⁸ there are, nonetheless, stable fields, strategies, rules and trophies to be fought for within the 'game' in question. The (playing) field, as a stable, demarcated arena, is the foundation that enables us to analyse movement at all as it becomes the ground figuring the player: it is both what delineates the game, where the game is actualized, as well as what is moved through in the process of the competition.

In relation to our current focus the difficulty with the notion of field is that it implies a stability and demarcation of social structure that corresponds poorly to the reality of changeable and emergent social environments. In Bourdieu's perspective people may move and act vertically in the social topography of a field, competing for position and capital,¹⁹ and thus act strategically in relation to each other as competitors, but they generally do so without having to worry about the movement of the field itself, which is so clearly a prime focus not only of my informants (see Vigh, 2006a, 2006b) but of most people caught in situations of uncertainty and change.²⁰ The game metaphor brings forth an image of people interacting with each other on a field rather than having to interact with each other *and* the field. The metaphors of 'game' and 'field', in other words, build on an idea of underlying permanence or very slow socio-political change, in itself illustrated in the languid character of habitus as history turned into nature (Bourdieu, 1992: 78–9).²¹ It underplays the experience of, for example, speed, flux or turbulence (cf. Armitage and Virilio, 1999; Virilio, 2001). This is not to imply that social fields, in the Bourdieuesque perspective, are static entities. Yet what he presents us with is a theory of constitution through slow processes of sedimentation and habituation that greatly differ from the Guinea-Bissauian example and, it would seem, from any situation with a tendency toward increased entropy and instability.

GPS-LANDSCAPES

This slow process of sedimentation and geological change becomes even more noticeable in the concept that currently seems to be increasingly popular for defining the ground upon which lives are figured, namely that of (social/cultural/ethnic) landscapes.²² The concept of landscape serves a function as it paints a picture of social formations as having topographies and multiple layers. Yet it is, I hold, an inadequate point of departure when describing the type of social environment that I have illuminated here. What we are witnessing is a geographical fallacy, a GPS-geography based on the presumption of a universal ontology of landscapes that cross-cuts not just cultures and

societies but epistemic regions and assumes that the characteristics of physical landscapes can be transposed upon other environments such as the social. Taking 'landscapes' at face value when analyzing social formations gives us a metaphor that might be easy to think with but which is ill-equipped at encompassing and describing the experience of change and movement that underlies and so often characterizes the social world.

Tim Ingold has, in a couple of recent and interesting books, dwelled on the way we inhabit and move across landscapes and environments. Much of Ingold's work is fascinating and his notion of wayfaring is closely related to notions of practice within moving environments. While wayfaring, he states:

People do not traverse the surface of the world whose layout is fixed in advance – as represented on the cartographic map. Rather they 'feel their way' through a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being through the combined action of human and non-human agencies. (2000: 155)

Ingold's work thus seems to be able to further our knowledge of the way we move within our physical landscapes, which are not to be seen as naturally given, but rather as '*congealed* taskscapes' (2000: 199, my emphasis), constituted by our understanding of and life within them. Yet, the term '*congealed*' equally underscores where the perspective falls short in relation to the current discussion: the frozen and fixed character of the landscape is far removed from the scenario described. Ingold himself emphasizes that landscapes are in motion, but they are so 'on a scale immeasurably slower and more majestic than that on which our own activities are conducted' (2000: 201). In other words, Ingold's observations can point us in the right direction in relation to the manner in which we move and dwell within our physical worlds, yet they seem less adept at illuminating social environments and practice. The major obstacle for putting Ingold's theories to work in the current debate is, thus, related to the speed and acceleration of change, which, as he rightly points out, differ dramatically from the 'natural' to the non-material and social aspects of our lives.

Even more exemplary in relation to the dominance of perceived solid grounds of enactment is his definition of navigation, which he sees as a pre-planned and cartographically oriented movement.²³ Despite having a keen interest in etymology, Ingold seems so focused on terrestrial landscapes, constituted through formations of slow sedimentation and repetition, and so keen on the sedentarism of dwelling, that he misses an important point of departure, namely that navigation stems from the Latin *navigare* meaning, as said, to sail and go by sea. The reason for the merging of 'navigation' and 'map-using' (2000: 236), even within more socially focused lines of analysis is, of course, that moving within an uncertain and moving environment highlights people's efforts to gain an overview, envision possible trajectories and predict future configurations of their (social) environments; it accentuates the way people imagine the unfolding of their worlds as well as the way that these images of possible and probable futures affects their acts in the here and now. Yet the fact that navigation can spur a social cartographic process does not mean that we should treat the two as synonymous or reduce navigation to map-using. Rather than designating a pre-planned movement reflected onto a map, the concept of navigation is intricately tied to the practice of moving across a moving environment, which emphasizes the construction of tentative mappings and a constant

dialogue between changing plots, possibilities and practice. In a social perspective, the cartographic process (mapmaking) is multiple and in constant becoming, and rather than separating map and movement, the concept of social navigation demonstrates how the two are constantly shaped and attuned to each other.

I find Ingold's work enlightening and innovative in many ways, yet two problems arise when applying his analytical perspectives to *social* life. First of all, differentiating between wayfaring and navigation, as different types of knowledge and movement, seems unworkable when examining the way people move in moving environments. Rather than being oppositional or sequential, what we see in such situations is that people strike a dialogue between the *motional* and the *positional*. A skilled navigator, social or otherwise, is one who is able to adjust his knowledge of map, position and plot to a multiplicity of experienced and anticipated influences and forces. In other words, social navigation entails simultaneously moving toward a distant future location or condition (that is, movement toward future positions and possibilities), *and* making one's way across immediate and proximate oncoming changes and forces of the near future. Furthermore, rather than being predefined and cartographically pinpointed, our environments and futures are, in such situations, contingent upon our knowledge of the past, our experience of the here and now as well as the emergent or potential possibilities and difficulties within it, entailing that the map is never a static set of coordinates but a dense and multi-dimensional imaginary, which is constantly in the process of coming into being. The cartographic understanding of navigation is lodged in a geographically informed perspective of the element that people move through as stable matter, a sedentary, sedimented surface. The consequence is that when looking at a social terrain the GPS perspective sees not the multiple movements within it but merely the coordinates that demarcate it. Though the assumption of underlying stability may lend itself expediently to analysing the way we inhabit and move within terrestrial, sedentary surfaces, it is inadequate for illuminating the way we act within more fluctuating environments. Perspectives on landscapes seem unable to properly account for the plasticity, multidimensionality and density of the social and therefore have a tendency to surface simplistic understandings of social practice and perspectives. What Ingold constructs is a GPS version of navigation that conflates the concept and misses the point, namely that when we navigate, we are always in the process of feeling our way through the immediate convulsions of a fluid environment whilst simultaneously trying to gain an overview and make our way toward a point in or beyond the horizon.

FROM SCAPES TO ENVIRONMENTS

So the question is: what do we do when social environments – as seen from within – are more akin to a choppy sea than to a (playing) field or landscape? The answer lies, I think, in setting the landscapes in motion. As *scape* refers both to 'a scene' and 'a view', it lends itself expediently to analysing the way we experience and understand our worlds, yet looking at social life, it seems that we could perhaps – at least for the sake of its metaphorical associations – exchange the concept of landscape for that of seascape. Like the field, a seascape has a certain topography, indicated in the term *scape* itself,²⁴ yet its topographicality is not a static or transparent structural grid but rather a changeable and constantly emergent one. Furthermore, seascapes are multidimensional and dense, entailing that agents within them constantly have to take their bearings in relation to

multiple forces (waves, wind, current, stars, and so on), some of which are in rapid motion while others are cyclical or relatively static.

However, not everything – even in situations of turbulence – is in rapid motion, and though consideration of a seascape’s metaphorical associations seems to help us rethink the relationship between agency, structure and social change in a way that makes it more attentive to motion and movement, its oceanic connotations are unfortunate. Thinking with seascapes may allow us to place people within moving environments and highlight the way that they strike an interpretative dialogue between the influence of multiple forces, their envisioned motion through them and the actual interaction within them; a seascape connotes multidimensionality and a dense temporality within practice as it illuminates the non-sequentialized relationship between movement related to immediately encountered change, movement toward an imagined position and the constantly sought dialogue between the immediate and the imagined, that is, what is envisioned as coming after the next wave, the next weather front, next current and so on, which can be pondered but of which we can never be certain as it is dependent on the interplay between forces, and hence outcomes, that are too numerous to predict. Yet, though seascapes are in motion and the forces within them multiple, the downside to the metaphor is that it creates an unfortunate picture of everything being adrift and afloat as well as depicting agents as moving on them, which is why the concept of environment seems to have an edge over its counterparts when referring to the social. As with a seascape, an environment contains multiple forces and influences, yet rather than moving on it we move within and, thus, experience it from within (Jackson, 1998: 204).

The fact that our social environments are in movement is, importantly, not unique to Bissau or, for that matter, to areas of conflict or decline. All social environments are in perpetual motion, yet some move at a slower pace than others, so that people have time to internalize and routinize change. Equally, we may have stability in some areas of our lives and rapid change and uncertainty in others. Furthermore, though there may be a difference in the speed of change between given societies, it is important to emphasize that social navigation – as a modality of movement – is related to one’s social position and experience of control over social forces rather than only to societal characteristics. This equally means that the background variable(s) that influence us as we ‘navigate’ are not singular and objective (rich or poor, peaceful or war struck); it is our position within our social environments that designates our ability to control its flow of events. In other words, we all navigate, but the necessity of having to move in relation to the movement of social forces depends on the speed and volatility of change as well as the level of exposure or shelter that our given social positions and ‘capital’ grants us (cf. Evans and Furlong, 1997; Virilio, 2001).

SPEED, OPACITY AND POWER

The concept of social navigation is, as such, not restricted to West Africa or areas of political turmoil and volatility. As our social worlds are always in motion – on the micro, meso or macro level – we need not limit its use to certain areas or situations. Though it becomes increasingly noticeable in turbulent social and political circumstances, it does not stem from it. We all navigate, but the intensity and visibility of our navigational efforts depend on the speed and/or opacity of social change and our ability to control oncoming movement. In other words, we all constantly struggle to gain the element of

control that will allow for escape or positive engagement (Jackson, 1998). Yet, this element of control is best understood on a background of movement and power. As Jackson (2008) has shown in a recently published article, even entities as structured as Western bureaucracies can be experienced as opaque, volatile and wavering, when seen from the perspective of the people on whom the impersonal order acts. For people who are caught in bureaucratic situations that work beyond their grasp and logic, such bureaucracies paradoxically (in the Weberian sense [see Weber, 1998]) seem to produce precisely the uncertainty that they seek to eliminate.

As an analytical optic, navigation works just as well for illuminating practice in situations of organizational change, opaque power configurations or family fights as it does for shedding light on fashionistas, innovation imperatives or the way people react to, for example, climate change. It merely builds on the theoretical premise that as an emergent property the social fabric is a developing reality (cf. Kapferer, 1976: 3) and that people act in relation to how they experience and anticipate their social formations to change and unfold. This forces us to tune our social-scientific gaze to practice as motion within motion. Acknowledging that for our interlocutors the social environment is not stable or static but an unfolding process requires that we analyse practice in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that strategy, tactics and practice (cf. De Certeau, 1988) are constructed and actualized in, and constantly attuned to, a shifting environment and its imagined configurations.

In other words, we may think of and theoretically construct our social environments in ways that make them seem like terrestrial facts of nature imbued with the solidity of geological formations and the clarity of GPS geography – but in lived life we often do so with a caution that actually counters the imagery: the multiplicity of social forces surrounding and engaging us makes it impossible to mechanically predict or control our worlds so that we constantly live – on one level or another – with an eye to movement. In fact, both *prediction* and *precaution* – strangely unanalysed within political anthropology – point our attention to the fact that we are, to some extent, aware of underlying movement and the relative unpredictability of consequences. ‘I did not see it coming’ people say when expectations have been met with unpredicted change. And exactly trying to anticipate ‘what is coming’ and attuning action accordingly is what is at stake in social navigation, as action is plotted, and tactics are generated, in the knowledge that the context of enactment is always potentially changing.

One of the main obstacles to a proper understanding of the interactivity of action lies, as such, in the analytical predominance of landscapes and sedentarism. As seen from a Heideggerian perspective, social being is not just located in dwelling or inhabiting, but in participating in the ongoing flow of life (cf. Heidegger, 1993). ‘The essence of life,’ Minkowski says in similar vein, is ‘a feeling of participation in a flowing onward’ (Minkowski in Bachelard, 1994: xvi).²⁵ Yet positive participation in the flow of life is not only a question of will but just as much one of power:

Anxiety and audacity, fear and courage, despair and hope are born together: But the proportion in which they are mixed depends on the resources in one’s possession. Owners of foolproof vessels and skilled navigators view the sea as the site of exciting adventures; those condemned to unsound and hazardous dinghies would rather hide behind wind-breakers and think of sailing with trepidation. Fears and joys that

emanate from the instability of things are distributed highly unequally. (Bauman, 2001: 122)

No-one has a foolproof vessel and only idiots would lull themselves into thinking that they can navigate with indifference to surrounding movement and environment. Not everything can be navigated and not all situations are navigable precisely because navigation is not just a question of drawing a line between two points on a map: the movement of the social environment influences our every endeavor. It destabilizes our coordinates and changes the map as we move along.

In this perspective, the concept of navigation directs our attention both to the way people engage in the world and the way they move toward positions they perceive as being better than their current location and the possibilities within them. Yet in doing so it highlights the limits of the power embedded in our capacity to define and control our social worlds. In other words, no matter what the level of power, we are never completely free to move as we want, and rather than being vulgarly voluntaristic, navigation actually points our attention to the fact that we move in relation to the push and pulls, influence and imperatives, of social forces. The concept, thus, counters an over-emphasis of agency which depicts 'the agent', as Iris Murdoch stated 30 years ago in her critique of existentialism, as an individual who 'freely chooses his reasons . . . a highly conscious, self-contained being' (Murdoch, 1970: 35). In other words, it works against an image of the 'agent' as an unconditioned individual, leading us away from radical voluntarism and individualism and allowing us to illuminate agency without accepting the idea of an autonomous and absolute subject (cf. Bevir, 1999).

As said earlier, strategy can be defined as the process of demarcating and constituting space and tactics as the process of navigating them. The difference between tactics and strategy, as sketched by De Certeau, was initially theorized by Clausewitz, who sees tactics as the military practice created and actualized in relation to a specific battle – that is, the ordering of action in actual situations of combat – and strategy as the ordering of the relation between battles directed towards the primary goal of winning the war. Or, in his own words, 'tactics is the theory of the use of military forces in combat. Strategy is the theory of the use of combats for the object of the war . . . or the employment of the battle as the means towards the attainment of the object of the war' (Clausewitz, 1997: 75, 141). In De Certeau's less militaristic perspective the distinction is used to illuminate (political) practice, enabling us to shed light on different actualizations of agency. Most often both types of political agency will obviously be in use, but as ideal types the differentiation allows us to see that we can act politically by either trying to establish a space in which we seek to impose and institutionalize our understanding or structuration of the world, a sedentary act of creating a domain, or by navigating the spaces of others to our advantage, a migratory act of creating trajectories. *Dubriagem* and all of the vernacular analogies described above are, in this perspective, tactical, as practice that is characterized by a quality of astuteness. *Dubriagem* is not a process of constitution, formation or construction but, as indicated by Pedro's body language as he shadowboxes social forces, one of flexibility, negotiation and adjustment. It is, in other words, not a question of assertion and crystallization but of dynamism and fluidity. On a final note it should equally be emphasized that social navigation does not characterize a mechanical practice toward a goal but a practice that is tied up in a range of power

configurations, which in themselves constitute the moving environment our lives are set in, and in which we may be dominant in one yet weak in another. Our power of movement is situationally defined.

CONCLUSION

As motion squared the concept of social navigation brings about a perspectival and metaphorical shift that provides a good point of departure for a reworking of the relationship between agency and social forces. The concept emphasizes the fact that our lives are set in moving environments and that the image of immobility or petrifyingly slow processes of change that generally flaws our ideas of social formations and space needs to be replaced by 'an image of complex mobilities' and 'convergence of waves and currents' (Lefebvre, 1991: 91–2). The empirical material presented in this article, thus, forces us to rethink how our conceptual tools can be attuned to volatile environments. But it furthermore makes us aware of a more general need within the social sciences to rethink the interplay between agency, social forces and change. It points our attention to the way that 'the spatial turn' (Sheller and Urry, 2006) in anthropology has been guided by a geographical fallacy, namely the idea of social space as similar to terrestrial landscapes, as solidified surfaces of enactment, and provides an opportunity for reconceptualizing some of the more fundamental aspects of social life.

As an analytical optic the concept of social navigation, designating motion within motion, is interesting as it grants us an alternative vision of the way people and groups move in their social environments as well as of the constant configuration of the social environments themselves. It affords a view to the dynamic co-creation of figure and ground, showing us that people act in and shape their social environments in constant dialogue with the way the social environment moves and the way it is predicted to 'act' upon them and shape the circumstances of their lives. The social environments our lives are set in are in multiple processes of motion and action is never merely a prefigured actualization of a plot or strategy but a constant – almost cybernetic – attunement to change and movement within our social environments, in turn affecting the way we plot action, envision social goals and beacons and actualize our plot in and through the environment in question. Beacons translate, in a social perspective, into hope (or fear) – not a given, durable point in a 'scape', but a somewhat frail and delicate imagined position in the yet to come, which changes in relation to both the movement of the agent and of the social environment.

Invoking 'navigation', we thus tacitly acknowledge that the agent is positioned within a force field which moves him and influences his possibilities of movement and positions. Yet, the consequences of this go deeper than just mending an analytical flaw and adding external influences to our idea of agency. In fact, taking navigation seriously entails a rethinking of the setting in which our lives are configured and reconfigured and of the relationship between the two. Where many social scientific illuminations of practice position people and their movement within relatively stable and solidified social settings, indicated in the words we use to describe the 'ground' upon which we move – social structures, arenas, fields or landscapes – something interesting happens when invoking the concept of navigation: our analytical gaze moves toward the way people not just act in but interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence (in *potentia* and *presentia*) of social forces and change. In other words,

when we look at movement we need to look at it 'squared'; it is not just individuals who 'are on the move but also the finishing lines of the track they run on and the running tracks themselves' (Bauman, 2001: 125).

Notes

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- 1 Jensen defines interactivity as 'the relationship between two or more people who, in a given situation, mutually adapt their behaviour and action to each other' (1998: 188). Like the concept of intermorphology, interactivity has its point of departure in linguistics and communication theory, yet when put to work in relation to social life, both concepts grant us a possibility of focusing on the way action shapes social environments and social environments shape action.
- 2 The realization that social environments are not as solid as they are often presented as being and that this influences the way we move within them is not novel. Similar points have been made by influential scholars such as Bauman (2000, 2002) and Virilio (2001).
- 3 See: <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=77084>
- 4 See: http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/ontv/unreported_world/guinea+bissau+cocaine+country/880852
- 5 At its most evident, the 'everyday' is seen as the social and cultural acts, processes and formations which people take for granted – as the imponderable background of our lives, our orientation and our efforts at making sense of the social worlds we produce and inhabit (Schutz and Luckmann, 1995; Schutz, 1996). Our everyday, as an experiential quality, leads a silent life behind our awareness only to come to light when we are confronted with that which it is not. Most simply, this could be the realization of our normal, everyday bodily states through the experience of imbalance, such as when catching a cold; at a more complex and abstract level, it can be the awareness of our interpretations of the world through encountering interpretations that are foreign to our understanding of the world. The everyday thus appears to us in comparison, that is, when juxtaposed with the unusual or the extraordinary. It is the 'matter of fact' reality of our existence, which we only become aware of when it is challenged or confronted (Schutz and Luckmann, 1995: 128).
- 6 I use the term 'illegal' migrant, rather than the more politically correct terms 'irregular' and 'undocumented'. For those of my informants who have entered the EU either without documents or by manipulating rules and regulations, illegality saturates their migrant experiences. It defines their interaction with their host society and the status comes to shade even attempted licit actions.
- 7 The active tense of the verb.
- 8 *Bu ten ku dubria pa odja bu vidalodja bu futuro.*
- 9 Expediency is, of course, always situationally defined.
- 10 *Portuguese-English Dictionary*, George G. Harrap & Co., London, 1963.
- 11 Susan R. Whyte, personal communication.

- 12 Reed-Danahay interestingly relates the French concept to social fluidity, which brings its meaning back to the concept of social navigation as currently understood.
- 13 Even here there does not seem to be a link with Portuguese, as 'fog' translates to *nevoeiro* and 'foggy' to *nevoento*.
- 14 See Reed-Danahay (1996: 64).
- 15 The distinction between tactics and strategy refers, of course, to ideal types. In lived life we are all both tacticians and strategists as power is situationally defined and does not, as Foucault (1991) so forcefully reminded us, reside in the person but in the relation. It thus does not transfer unproblematically from one situation to another, entailing that the agent who acts strategically in one context may very well be forced to act tactically in another.
- 16 Most probably because the diachronic and synchronic modes of analyses can appear mutually exclusive.
- 17 For Bourdieu, the field is a space of competition and struggle defined by its configuration of objective relations between different positions, that is, by being a specific constellation of agents holding and competing for different positions defined by different forms of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 84–85). However, whereas these configurations might change as people compete for capital, the positions – the structural grid – seem invested with a foundational status and hardness, constituting the stability of the model.
- 18 As Bradd Shore illuminates in his book *Culture in Mind* (1996: 105), it is the very existence of rules that distinguishes games from play. Yet an even more elementary difference is, in my point of view, the fact that 'play' is directed towards exploration whereas 'game' is directed towards competition.
- 19 The logic here is that vertical competition is a struggle after capital and positions of capital involving strategies, subjugation and domination such as, for example, via symbolic violence.
- 20 Bourdieu has made a contribution to our understanding of social action that differs from, for example, that of Giddens, by emphasizing the concept of field over that of institution, leading us towards a more dynamic picture of practice via the quest for capital – of following strategy rather than rules (Harker et al., 1990: 202). However, what we see in and via the position of the field in the game model (Bourdieu notwithstanding) is that the movements of agents are enacted on a field perceived as stable, which is my point of contestation.
- 21 Here habitus bears remarkable similarities to the concept of sedimentation. In fact the consistent use of habit(us) seems to refer to sediment as both verb and noun.
- 22 If we search the major international publishers for titles and abstracts we see a surge, since the change of the millennium, in publications in which the concept of social landscape figures as a key term.
- 23 On the contrary, navigation as *process* and *practice* allows us to combine mapmaking and wayfinding as we simultaneously navigate the immediate and the imagined, i.e. the next hurdle as well as the many imagined to come, in our movement towards a distant goal. The fact that Ingold needs to add the adjective 'terrestrial' when talking about navigation on land further indicates the problems inherent in the definition.
- 24 Topography is not only a spatial description but also concerns the specific relationship between elevations and descents. What separates a terrain from a field is that it

is in constant motion both in relation to the space it occupies as well as to its topography. Where fields are static and earthbound, in my use of the concept of terrain it is in motion and oceanic (though not, of course, in the Freudian sense).

- 25 The reference is directed toward the work of the French phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski and chapter 9 of his book *Vers une Cosmologie: fragments philosophique* (1963).

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HENRIK VIGH is Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen. He is the author of *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* and co-editor of *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Copenhagen and has researched issues of youth and conflict in both Europe and Africa, developing, in the process, the concept of social navigation as an analytical optic that enables us to see how agents move through fluid and volatile social environments. He is currently researching undocumented West African migrants in Europe and the networks that they depend on, develop and are caught up in. *Address*: Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, opgang E, 1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark. [email: henrik.vigh@anthro.ku.dk]
