Mobilities by John Urry

By Javier Caletrío (Social Scientist) 10 December 2012

Mobilities examines how transport and communication systems enable social relations at a distance and their implications for social inequality and alternative social and environmental futures. It outlines a sociology of the future based on the study of complex mobile systems.

Globalization and the ‘annihilation of distance’

A recurrent image of global corporate advertisements, especially those of high-tech companies such as Cisco, IBM, Oracle or Microsoft, is that of smooth landscapes of open horizons and frictionless communication, movement and exchange. Information, people and goods appear to flow effortlessly through these egalitarian and technologically mediated spaces. These are spaces of possibility bearing no trace of borders, limits or power relations, where geography and distance no longer seem to matter and historical relations have been flattened into a universal present. Often references to diverse unspecified, generic places are made through stereotypical images of traditional and modern ways of life (e.g. the Chinese girl, the Caribbean mother, the European farmer, the African teacher), each one representing a node in a global network of communication. Strung together, such images suggest the global reach of technology. Technology is implied as bringing modernity to any place and to anyone, no matter how remote, serving as an equalizer of opportunities in an emerging and peaceful global civil society. Paradoxically, what is often missing from these images is the technology itself, hence presenting travel and communication as an effortless possibility universally available. At a time when global corporate media has an unprecedented power, through screens, to illuminate domestic space at home and public spaces on the move, this particular way of representing what social commentators have called the ‘annihilation of distance’ in social relations is a pervasive imagining of what globalization looks like. These carefully crafted, purified landscapes provide a narrative, a language to make sense of today’s economy and society in a way that legitimizes certain political and economic visions of globalization. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, distance has certainly been ‘annihilated’ – this is what social scientists have also referred to as ‘time-space compression’ – but not in the utopian way that the adverts suggest. It has been annihilated for some people and places and with huge consequences for the future of the global environment.
Making visible the ways of overcoming distance

Mobilities provides a theoretical perspective to critically examine the significance of distance in social relations. In so doing it brings back to the surface all that is being buried under those images of smooth, floating landscapes: the vast, heavy materiality of transport and communication infrastructures that enable travel, communication and dreams of an ‘elsewhere’. Related to this is the significance of history, especially as materialized in decaying infrastructures and entrenched habits obstinately projecting elements of certain pasts into uncertain and increasingly troubled futures, and the growing disparities in access to transport and communication and its effect on social inequality. To neglect distance is to let crucial aspects of social life slip under the critical gaze, to let them remain where they have rested for most of the twentieth century.

Dealing with distance in social science

Social science has tended to regard distance as largely unproblematic by focusing on patterns in which human subjects directly interact together. While this propinquity in social relations may have been the norm for parts of the population in pre-modern western societies, still the need to deal with distance has been a historical constant, especially regarding empires. Historically all societies have dealt with distance although they have done so through different processes reflecting wider social and technological conditions. In developing a theoretical lens to analyze how distance is socially, culturally and economically organized, Urry argues that in contemporary societies these processes stem from five different ‘mobilities’ or forms of travel and communication: the movement of people (corporeal mobilities), the physical movement of objects, imaginative travel (especially via the TV), virtual travel (through Internet), and communicative travel (especially telephone conversations).

Mobility systems

Each of these intersecting mobilities presupposes a number of ‘mobility-systems’. In pre-modern times these systems included sea shipping, transhumance and courier mail (homing pigeons, foot messengers and riders on horseback) to name a few. Modern mobility-systems include the railway, automobility, and flying. The distinction between modern and pre-modern mobility systems is an important one for Urry. It would be difficult to understand modern life, he argues, without paying attention to the changes in the experience of time and space brought about by these mobility systems originating around 1840 in England and France. The railway, the telegraph, the postal system, the package tour to name but a few, fundamentally changed everyday life and inaugurated a historical phase where human life became inextricably entangled with, and dependent upon, machines.

‘This is what I mean by “modernity”, that moment when enormously powerful machines are imbricated within human experience’ (p. 93).

It was the railway, argues Urry, which first posited machinery as a focus of quotidian experience, facilitating the large-scale movement of people. Another hugely significant twentieth-century system has been the car that individualized mobility and introduced flexibility in the scheduling of social relations. The twentieth century has also seen the development of flying, telephone, networked computers and other communication technologies. Each of these new systems is extensively analyzed in Part 2 of the book, especially the ways in which each of them has defined the conditions and possibilities in which later systems had to evolve.
Novel patterns of intermittent presence and absence

The significance of these interdependent and increasingly complex systems lies in their capacity to stretch social relations around the world. Friendship, work and family life are today intertwined, ‘networked’, in these complex systems. Without those material assemblages enabling travel and communication social relations would not reach far. This does not mean that face-to-face relations are outdated or in decline. The rise of communication technologies did generate expectations of fewer face-to-face encounters. What is emerging, however, are novel patterns of intermittent presence and absence in which scheduled face-to-face meetings are still essential to keep relations alive. These expanding personalized sets of social relations have important implications for social inequality. Because they provide emotional, financial and practical benefits, access to the means to maintain such relations becomes a key factor in determining such inequality in the age of global networked mobilities.

Futures

Emerging patterns of social relations are generating high levels of travel between network members separated by great distances because meeting up is still so significant. Thus, as a result of these and other processes such as the rise of tourism, in contemporary societies there is more movement for more people across longer distances. Recently these trends have accelerated not only in the rich North but also in other parts of the world, especially the so called ‘emerging societies’ of China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey and Indonesia, among others. In the final chapter of the book Urry discusses the possibilities for these trends to continue in the face of unprecedented challenges such as global warming and ‘peak oil’. Climate change is threatening to radically transform living conditions on the planet and there is a need to reduce global carbon emissions, a substantial part of which are produced by transport. Likewise, peak oil means that oil will increasingly be less plentiful and more expensive. Both suggest a potential limit to current patterns in worldwide mobilities with significant consequences for social, economic and political relations. Drawing on earlier discussions on mobility systems and especially automobility, Urry outlines some of the long term dynamics and path dependencies created during the twentieth century and the scope these dynamics have left for alternative mobilities in the twenty first century. He suggests that there are two likely future scenarios with different implications for future mobilities. One scenario is ‘regional warlordism’ resulting from failed attempts to curb carbon emissions and prevent catastrophic climate change and extreme weather events which would provoke mass movements of refugees fleeing devastated areas with shortage of water, food and energy resources, especially oil and gas. This would most probably involve conflict between neighbouring regions for the control of scarce resources, the collapse of long distance mobility systems and a localization of social and economic networks. The other scenario presumes the maintenance of significant levels of mobility without compromising the global climate. This would involve moving across a tipping point towards carbon neutral, digitized mobility systems. The cost of the first scenario in terms of suffering and a reduction of the standards of living leaves the second scenario as a preferable alternative, but the price to pay for that would be a potential loss in personal freedom as the digitized mobility systems are able to track all movements.

Contribution to the mobilities literature

In 2000 Urry published Sociology Beyond Societies, an essential book that proposes a manifesto for a twenty-first century sociology capable of addressing the new realities of a global era. This manifesto would later be articulated as the ‘new mobilities paradigm’. The specific contribution Mobilities makes to the mobilities field is to examine two issues that
remained insufficiently developed in Sociology Beyond Societies: the difference
temories and distance make to social relations and the significance and differences
between mobility systems. Much of the material included in each chapter had been
published as journal articles over the previous seven years, but this book is far more than
the sum of its parts. All chapters are cross-referenced and well integrated into a coherent
argument. Even being familiar with those journal papers, one reads this book feeling there
is something new that had escaped previous readings and understandings. Readers from
outside Europe may find there are few references to empirical cases on other parts of the
world. This is, however, a remark applying to the mobilities field in general more than to
this book in particular.

By November 2012, Mobilities had been cited more than seven hundred times in
academic texts, which is outstanding for a book published in 2007. While most often the
book is referenced in favourable terms, there are also critical appraisals. These come most
often in the form of papers which seek to contest claims about the decline of nation states
or the alleged irrelevance of classical sociology in times of globalization. One of the most
energetic criticisms of the arguments developed in Mobilities has come from Bryan
Turner (2006; 2010) who observes the spread of what he calls an ‘immobility regime’ in
large parts of the world due to more extensive and intensive securitization policies being
implemented by states. Such trends towards deglobalization, Turner argues, are
manifested in an inexorable proliferation of walls, enclaves and enclosures. In these and
other similar accounts there is a tendency to regard the mobilities turn as presuming a
universal increase of mobility worldwide. It is important to clarify, however, that the
‘mobilities turn’ is concerned with the ways in which the mobilities of some cause the
immobilities of others. The ‘mobilities turn’ looks at mobility as a relational entity. In this
respect, arguments such as those of Turner seem to confirm rather than contest the
relevance of looking at mobility and immobility in order to understand social and political
dynamics in contemporary societies.

About the author
John Urry is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for Mobilities
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globalization by studying how physical, virtual and imaginative mobilities reconstitute
social life.

References
Mobilities
by John Urry
Polity
2007
335 pages

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

Mobilities paradigm

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

Motility

Every person, every group can be characterised by greater or lesser propensities for moving around a geographic, economic and social space. “Motility” has been the name given to these aptitudes, a reference to the use of this term in biology.

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Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology,
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