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## **Mobilities paradigm**



Submitted by Forum Vies Mobiles on Fri, 09/02/2016 - 11:41

*Acknowledgement: I am grateful to the late John Urry for his comments in November 2014 on an early version of this text focusing on Kuhn's notion of paradigm and whether mobilities research deserves the status of paradigm.* <br /><br />

## **Long definition**

<br /> ### Dealing with distance

Dealing with distance is a vital dimension of social life. This is a foundational tenet of the mobilities paradigm. Societies have dealt with distance in different ways in order to seek shelter and security, exert and defend themselves against violence, control territories and populations, obtain food, water and other resources, trade, manufacture, organize collective action, cultivate friendship, maintain family life, gain knowledge, experience pleasure, and satisfy spiritual needs. A fundamental aspect of living is learning to deal with distance and this learning process is socially organized, taking different forms in different social groups and moments in time. As an object of study, this issue was explicitly addressed during the twentieth century by only a few rather scattered and isolated researchers and, in general, the social sciences largely overlooked the role of distance (and the movement to overcome that distance) in social life<sup>[^1]</sup>. <br /><br />

## **A new synthesis**

In the 1990s and 2000s some of this early work began to be retrieved and synthesised along with a wide range of new contributions inspired by, and responding to, the new condition of 'globalization'. This work has expanded considerably and now

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## **Futures and the good life**

Despite recurrent hype about innovation in communication and transportation systems, technologies rapidly adapt to everyday practices and, as noted, dealing with distance is mostly a matter of habit. These socio-technical systems lay out a map of propensities (practical and aesthetic) that people quickly internalize as second nature. However, this does not mean that people passively accept and adapt to the possibilities afforded by these systems. Individuals also deliberate and make decisions about ways of dealing with distance guided by ethical, social, cultural and environmental criteria, often synthesized in culturally specific images of the good life. Dealing with distance has emerged as one of the critical issues of the twenty-first century as global warming has radically brought into question the viability of current, extensively mobile lifestyles and shown the urgency of transitions towards low carbon societies. <br /><br />

## **Criticisms**

The mobilities paradigm has been widely discussed in the social sciences, often sympathetically, yet sometimes more critically both by external observers and self-confessed mobilities researchers. Many of these criticisms have been made specifically in relation to those texts by John Urry and Mimi Sheller that outlined this approach most explicitly. Some of these criticisms include: <br /><br />

- **Paradigm:** Some observers have raised doubts as to whether the status of paradigm is deserved or appropriate<sup>[13]</sup>. Despite the difficulties of mapping a debate that largely happens, so to speak, 'off-record' -in conversations rather than in printed media-, one may suggest that these doubts may be partly related to the ambiguity with which the term paradigm is generally applied. For example, in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn uses the term paradigm in at least twenty-one different ways. These include shared theoretical assumptions, shared standards for evaluating explanations, an acknowledged past achievement that guides subsequent practice, an accepted view of the subject matter (ontology), or a metaphysical view of the world. Moreover, in the second edition of the book he proposes to substitute the term paradigm in the broader sense used here for 'disciplinary matrix' and to reserve the term paradigm for 'research exemplar' in the narrower sense of a concrete solution to problems or puzzles<sup>[14]</sup>. <br /><br /> It should be noted that amongst those who have accepted, at least tacitly, the existence of a mobilities paradigm there still are differing views about its full interpretation and rationalization. Scholars in fact disagree about, for example, basic units of analysis, philosophical approaches, key authors that have inspired it, or its potential to transform the social sciences. These differing views (which relate to some of the criticism below) reflect for some the richness and promising developments of this strand of research while for others it simply reflects its lack of a clear, coherence subject of study and its loose boundaries. <br /><br />

- **A simplification of mainstream sociology:** In 2000 John Urry published *Sociology Beyond Societies*, a landmark in the development of the mobilities paradigm. His call for a sociology of mobilities was premised on the critique of the notion of 'society' as a territorially bound entity. Some sociologists saw this as an oversimplification and argued that sociology examines social processes



which are not conceived of as being physically bounded and that this therefore renders the call for a paradigm shift unconvincing<sup>[15]</sup>. <br /><br />

- **Epochalism:** Related to the previous point, sociologist Mike Savage regards the mobilities paradigm as an example of sociology's tendency to periodically announce radical changes<sup>[16]</sup>. This tendency towards 'epochalism', he argues, has been particularly prominent in British sociology in the 1990s and 2000s. Reflecting on the quick succession of 'new' social conditions identified during this period such as reflexive modernity, globalization, post-Fordism, individualization, or disorganized capitalism, Savage writes: 'What does it mean for the credibility of social scientific knowledge itself when it seems to so readily embrace a culture of inbuilt obsolescence, where announcements about the arrival of fundamentally new conditions are no sooner made than they are dissipated by the next version<sup>[17]</sup>?' On a different but partly related note, Peter Merriman has called for caution about the tendency to restrict discussions about mobile methods to new technologies and tacitly presume that more traditional research methods are outdated or ill-suited for mobilities research. There is a risk, he argues, of 'over-animating' mobile subjects and missing important historical dynamics<sup>[18]</sup>. This criticism would apply also to over-enthusiastic calls for 'live sociology' requiring researchers to work on the move as the future direction for the sociology of mobilities in an era of 'big data'<sup>[19]</sup>. <br /><br />

- **Limits of the mobilities paradigm:** While the possible contribution of the mobilities paradigm to the study of subjects such as transport and tourism may be more or less obvious, its potential impact in other fields and disciplines may be less so. It has been argued that the mobilities paradigm should have made clearer the areas of social life to which it applies and, more specifically, those to which it makes only very indirect or no significant difference<sup>[20]</sup>. For example, writing about the mobilities paradigm's tendency to grant too much explanatory power to mobilities, Gerard Delanty argues that 'cosmopolitanism cannot be entirely separated from the normative vision of an alternative society and (...) this imaginary is also present as a cultural form of immanent transcendence. Identities and modes of cultural belonging, while being influenced by global mobilities, are not reducible to mobility'<sup>[21]</sup>. <br /><br />

- **Fluidity:** Particularly in the early 2000s the mobilities paradigm was understood by some as arguing that in conditions of globalization everything has entered a state of chaotic fluidity that has made the state redundant. This misinterpretation of the mobilities paradigm has been accompanied by the observation that the opposite is actually the case. For example, Bryan Turner observes the spread of an 'immobility regime' exemplified by the proliferation of walls and enclaves across the world due to a growing concern with security<sup>[22]</sup>. 'Sociologists', Turner argues, 'need to re-conceptualize globalization not as a system of endless and uncontrolled liquid mobility but as a system that also produces closure, entrapment and containment' (2010: 19). Partly related to this argument Noel Salazar has argued that 'The question is not so much about the overall rise or decline of mobility, but how various mobilities are formed, regulated, and distributed across the globe, and how the formation, regulation, and distribution of these mobilities are shaped and patterned by existing social, political, and economic structures<sup>[23]</sup>'. <br /><br />
- **Post-humanism:** Turner and Rojek have warned against the 'posthuman turn' in the social sciences referring specifically to the mobilities paradigm: <br /><br /> \*Urry argues that a reconstituted sociology should be founded around 'mobilities' rather than 'societies'. (...) It is easy to see why mobility, contingency and velocity are 'in the air' for social and cultural theorists. Our argument is that there are obvious dangers in identifying mobility as the primary defining feature of being in the world today. (...) Perhaps somewhat against the grain of fashion, we insist on the necessity of developing a reconstituted sociology with the embodied actor at its centre. There are serious dangers in responding to the challenges posed by new technologies with a post-human sociology. Our critique of decorative sociology is precisely that, through creating a privileged position for the cultural and aesthetic, it has undermined the significance of the economic, political and social dimensions of life. Questions of style and symbol have been permitted to overshadow matters of money (exchange), blood and bread. We contend that these matters are the indispensable foundations of being in the world at all times and in all places<sup>[24]</sup>. \* <br /><br />

- **Optimistic view of globalization:** Another criticism, related to the previous one, holds that mobilities research has largely participated in an optimistic view of the world as the quote illustrates: <br /><br /> *In the euphoric fin-de-siecle of the last century, the possibility of peaceful globalization and expanding democratization had never looked more promising. In response to these political changes, there was a general sense that political borders and cultural boundaries were disappearing. This view of modern societies is closely associated with the work of sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and John Urry who have often criticized mainstream sociology for its alleged focus on nation-states as its central topic. This optimistic vision of a changing social world was widely shared in the late 1990s<sup>[25]</sup>.* <br /><br /> The 1990s were certainly a period of relative optimism regarding global politics and this was partly reflected in theories of global change as globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai has explicitly acknowledged<sup>[26]</sup>. However, this criticism simplifies Urry's views in, for example, his book *Economies of Signs and Space* (with Scott Lash)<sup>[27]</sup> which explicitly discusses the dark side of globalization. Nonetheless it is fair to say that war and violence are underrepresented in the mobilities agenda. <br /><br />
- **Neglect of history:** Mimi Sheller has written inspiring historical accounts of mobilities such as in *Consuming the Caribbean* and *Aluminium Dreams*, and there are other good historical accounts or works that show sophisticated historical sensitivity such as those by human geographers Tim Cresswell, Peter Adey, Peter Merriman, or by cultural studies scholars such as Mirian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce. However, as Colin Pooley has persistently argued, mobilities research has not taken history seriously and, in general, there is a dominant focus on the new.<sup>[28]</sup> This is preventing a richer understanding on how long term trends shape emergent realities<sup>[29]</sup>. <br /><br />
- **Anglo and eurocentrism:** The mobilities paradigm was initially criticized for its strong reliance on experiences of European and North American societies, neglecting issues which are central to everyday experiences in other parts of the world such as chronic violence, insecurity and weak states<sup>[30]</sup>. Scholars have

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understood as one possible interpretation of the field.

Discipline

Sciences sociales

Visuel



Activer

Activé

Niveau de profondeur

Balise H2 + H3

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Désactivé

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Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)

Thématique

Concepts

Methods