

1. Videos

What is the mobility turn ?

By
John Urry (Sociologue)
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Many writers now mobilize the “mobility turn”. As this post-disciplinary concept spreads through social sciences, it has become essential to analyze the complex organization of today’s economic, social and political spaces, argues Professor John Urry.

My life as an academic involves travelling to interesting places to conferences, to workshops, to give lectures, to see exhibitions, to develop collaborations, even to write books with people on topics like mobile lives. But of course my travel mirrors and patterns are similar to the patterns of many other people. Sometimes it seems as if all the world is on the move. The early retired, international students, terrorists, members of diasporas, holidaymakers, business people, sports stars, asylum seekers, refugees and so on – these and many others seem to find the contemporary world is their oyster or at least their destiny. Criss-crossing the globe are the routeways of these many groups intermittently encountering each other in transportation and communication hubs, searching out in real and electronic databases the next coach, message, plane, back of lorry, text, train, bus, lift, car, web site and so on.

The modern travel phenomenon

The scale of this travelling seems immense. There are 1 billion legal international arrivals each year (compared with 25 million in 1950); there are 4 million air passengers each day; at any one time there are between 300,000 and 400,000 people in flight above the United States, equivalent to a city in the sky; and there are many refugees and today world citizens move 23 billion kilometres; and if resource constraints don’t get in the way it is predicted that by 2050– in 40 years’ time - that figure will have increased fourfold to 106 billion (see Urry 2007). People don’t necessarily spend more time travelling but they are travelling faster, and the amount of time people spend travelling seems to have remained constant if you average it out across the world’s population – at about one hour or so a day. Also, people don’t seem to make more journeys, it’s that when they do make journeys they use powerful machines to make those journeys and thus travel much greater distances. This industry of travel and tourism is the largest industry in the world, whether you measure it by the size of the employed population or the proportion of the global income it generates. And these patterns of fast movement seem to affect all countries around the world with statistics available now for at least 200 countries – and with most countries sending and also receiving significant numbers of travellers.

Today’s ‘department store’ world

An interesting writer and German scholar (Wolfgang) Schivelbusch overall concludes that for: ‘the 20th century traveller, the world has become one large department store of countrysides and cities’, although

of course there's huge variation and degree to which any particular set of people can voluntarily sample that department store on a regular basis (1986: 197; Urry 2002). This pattern of mainly but not entirely voluntary travel is the largest ever-peaceful movement of people across borders. Even with significant interruptions in the systems that has not until recently substantially abated. So being physically mobile has been for rich people and even for some poorer people a 'way of life' around the globe. And at the same time that people are moving, so of course, materials are also on the move, often carried by these moving people- openly, or inadvertently, or illegally. And the multinational sourcing of different components of manufactured products involves just-in-time delivery from around the world. So these converging mobile machines appear to be transforming many aspects of economic and social life that are in a sense on the 'move' or away from 'home'. And there are in this mobile world many complex connections between physical travel and modes of communication - forming new fluid patterns, often difficult to pin down, to stabilize. Some people say these physical changes appear to be 'de-materialising' connections, as people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas and indeed risks are 'on the move', making and remaking connections at often rapid speed around the world.

Developing the mobilities turn

So in this, issues of movement - of too little movement for some people or too much for others or of the wrong sort of movement or at the wrong time - become more central to many people's lives and to the operations of both small and large public, private and non-governmental organisations. And there are many issues here to do with mobility which have become centre-stage. In response to these developments, many writers have begun to mobilize a 'mobilities turn', a way of thinking and analyzing these processes, thinking through the character of economic, social and political relationships in the contemporary world (Bauman 2000). This mobilities turn is spreading in and through the social sciences, mobilizing analyses that have been historically static, fixed and concerned with predominantly a-spatial 'social structures'. This mobility turn is post-disciplinary, beyond the individual separate disciplines and concerned with the multiple ways in which economic, social and political life is performed and organized through time and across many complex spaces. Analyses of the complex ways that social relations are 'stretched' across the globe are generating theories, research findings and methods that 'mobilize' or are coming to assemble analyses of social order that are achieved in part on the move and contingently (see Cresswell 2006; Kellerman 2006; Urry 2007; and the new journal *Mobilities*). Overall mobilities have been a black box for the social sciences, generally regarded as a set of neutral technologies permitting forms of economic, social and political life that need to be explained by more significant kinds of causes.. To the extent to which transport and communication have been studied they have often been placed in separate categories with little interchange with the rest of the social science. Holidaymaking, walking, car driving, phoning, and so on are mainly ignored by the social sciences although they are manifestly significant for people's everyday lives. And indeed, everyday lives, social institutions, social practices all pre-suppose complex patterns of movement through time and across space.

A dependence on systems

These 'mobilities' also each presuppose 'systems.' Systems make possible movement: the systems provide the anticipation' that you can make the journey, that the message will arrive, that the parcel will get there, that the family group can meet up. Systems thus permit predictable and relatively risk-free repetition of the movement in question. And in the contemporary world there are many such systems include ticketing, oil supply, addresses, safety, protocols, web sites, money transfer systems, inclusive tours, and so on. These are repetitive systems, they keep the repetition going and make it seem natural to be able to make the journey to be able to see your friends or family. For people to be able to 'move', and for them to move objects is to have access to these relatively secure, regulated and risk-free systems. There are a number of systems that have been significant and one very striking growth of such systems occurred around 1840, when the first railway system was being built in England, the first

package tour took place in 1841, the development of the first national post system, the invention of photography in France and then in England and the first railway hotel (York), and also the first system of steam ships crossing the Atlantic all took place in a one to two year period. So suddenly there was this astonishing series of mobility systems and of course the 20th saw many other 'mobility-systems' developing, including the car-system, national telephone system, air power, high speed trains, electricity, modern urban systems, mobile phones and so on.

The fragility of a system

As we move into the new century there are a number of features of such systems – they are getting more and more complicated, they are made up of many elements and based upon an array of often specialised forms of expertise. They are increasingly interdependent with each other so that an individual journey presupposes a whole series of systems, working coherently together. Also, certainly since the 1970s onwards, those systems have become increasingly computer dependent and particularly dependent on specialist forms of software. And finally, and kind of problematically, many of these systems, because of their interdependence are vulnerable to what are being called 'normal accidents', accidents that are almost certain to occur from time to time, given the way that these systems are tightly locked-in together (Perrow 1999). So as people's patterns of lives have become more differentiated from each other, more distinct, so they paradoxically depend more and more on these systems working. So organising meeting up with others - family, friends, colleagues and so on, because they are spatially distributed so it requires more and more coordination, and it requires coordination through these diverse systems that have to be working, have to be in place, have to be providing the anticipation that they will be functioning. So personalization and system dependence is a particular feature of the mobility turn.

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.

En savoir plus x

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Theories

- Concepts
-
-

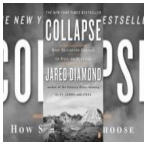


John Urry

Sociologue

British sociologist John Urry (1946-2016) was Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University. He was co-founder and director of the Centre for Mobilities Research from 2004 to 2015 and, in 2015, he co-founded the Institute for Social Futures. He wrote seminal mobilities texts such as *Sociology Beyond Societies* and *Mobilities*.

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