

1. Essential Reading



The New Mobilities Paradigm - by Mimi Sheller and John Urry

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)
11 December 2012

This paper describes a new paradigm or way of framing research in the social sciences revolving around the study of the interdependent movements of people, information, images and objects.

Over the last three decades, institutional, geopolitical and technological changes have enabled an increase in the magnitude and speed of the circulation of people, objects and information around the world, albeit with uneven effects upon different peoples and environments. Since the 1990s, this process has been paralleled by the growing attention paid to questions of travel and movement in a range of academic disciplines, particularly human geography, anthropology and sociology. In this influential paper, Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue that some elements of such a growing body of research constitute an emergent paradigm, a new way of framing research, in the social sciences.

The New Mobilities Paradigm breaks with the foundational assumption of twentieth-century social science that 'the social' is constituted by a set of intense relations between individuals in close physical proximity. The new mobilities paradigm argues that travel and communication technologies have enabled the proliferation of connections at a distance and that such distant and intermittent connections are crucial in holding social life together.

From this perspective, it becomes problematic to talk about self-contained societies in the sense that people speak of, for instance, 'Japanese society' because significant social relations occur across local and national boundaries. It also becomes problematic to assume that social relations involve just human beings (e.g. a face-to-face conversation) because travel and communication technologies heavily mediate people's conceptions of themselves and their relations with others and the world. This involves not just who they are but their capacities to engage with others and the physical environment. Attending to these capacities opens up new questions about social inequalities.

It follows from this, Sheller and Urry argue, that 'the social' as the object of study of a 'mobile sociology' should encompass those assemblages of humans and objects and their re-configuration over time and space. The morphology these assemblages have taken is that of networks with multiple, unevenly connected nodes around the world. Humans are then to be seen as indissolubly networked with machines. The new mobilities paradigm insists on the need to examine the systemic nature of these networks attending to their emergent properties. This suggests being sensitive to processes of becoming and multiple determinations in the evolution of global mobile networks.

This form of theorizing the social has been informed by a number of perspectives, including the sociology of Georg Simmel, science and technology studies of the material conditions of sociality (including Actor Network Theory), the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences, writings on embodiment and 'emotional geographies', social networks research, and complexity theory.

Sheller and Urry argue that the new mobilities paradigm legitimates new objects of study and new methods of sociological enquiry. These methods include ethnographies of micro-interactions of co-presence, participant observation and interviewing of people on the move ('mobile ethnographies' or mobile methods), 'time-space diaries', ethnographies of virtual and imaginative mobilities of Internet, methods to research the 'atmosphere' or 'feelings' of places, use of photographs and objects to recreate memories of meetings and places, tracing the circulation of objects ('follow the thing') physically or through tracking technologies, methods to research the spatial and temporal dynamics of transfer points such as airports and train stations.

This paper marked a significant step in the theorizing of mobilities by advancing the extraordinary work of synthesis initiated by John Urry in his *Sociology Beyond Societies*, published in 2000. Initially published in 2006, by November 2012, the paper had 761 citations many of which were in the fields where mobilities research has been received most favourably: tourism, migration and diaspora, transport and urban planning. The paper has also been referenced in papers and journals about ageing, new media, education, security, borders, risk, criminal economy, sport, citizenship, geopolitics, cosmopolitanism, disability, landscape, infrastructures, architecture, surveillance, energy, gender, consumerism, sustainability, globalization, transnationalism, development, complexity, social theory, climate change, social work, planning, management and social science methods. This large list is not exhaustive, yet its impressive diversity testifies to the appeal of the mobilities paradigm to researchers with very different interests and its potential to create a dialogue between the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. The arguments outlined in this paper have been developed in a further book by Urry entitled *Mobilities*, and a paper co-authored with Monika Büscher entitled 'Mobile methods and the empirical'.

About the authors

Mimi Sheller is a key theorist in mobilities studies. She is Professor of Sociology and founding Director of the New Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She was co-founder with John Urry of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster.

John Urry is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and co-founder and Director of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University. He is author of seminal mobilities texts such as *Sociology Beyond Societies* and *Mobilities*.

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.

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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.

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Mobile methods

Mobile methods produce insight by moving physically, virtually or analytically with research subjects. They involve qualitative, quantitative, visual and experimental forms of inquiry, and follow material and social phenomena.

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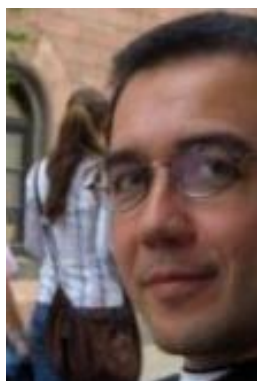
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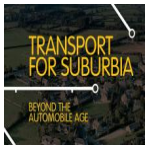


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Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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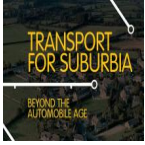
Javier Caletrío (11 December 2012), « The New Mobilities Paradigm - by Mimi Sheller and John Urry », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 04 May 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/501/new-mobilities-paradigm-mimi-sheller-and-john-urry>

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