Capitalism and collective action in the work of John Urry (II)

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This is the second of a two-entry series of Café Braudel on capitalism and collective action in the work of John Urry, one of the scholars who has advocated most forcefully a 'mobilities turn' in the social sciences. In the previous entry I introduced one of Urry's seminal books, The End of Organized Capitalism (1987), and noted an enduring concern with collective action in his work and, more specifically, in his mobile sociology. This entry introduces Economies of Signs and Space, another important book published seven years later that further develops the arguments initiated in the previous book. From a mobilities perspective, considering both books together is important because they illustrate a shift in focus in the study of the social, from a 'cross-national' analysis in The End of Organized Capitalism to a 'sociology of global flows' in Economies of Signs and Space.

Economies of Signs and Space (1994) is a sequel to *The End of Organized Capitalism* (1987) and takes as its point of departure the faster circulation of money, people, objects, information and images that have contributed to the 'disorganization' of capitalism in north Atlantic rim societies. Contrary to the pessimism of many analysts that see in those flows an expression of, or a catalyst for, the rise of consumerism, the banalization of culture and the erosion of places, environments and communities, Lash and Urry see reason for certain optimism. They believe that much of those changes associated with globalization are deleterious for human flourishing, but they also think that global flows can also open spaces for more progressive, cosmopolitan subjectivities. It is then their view that these flows not only erode but also structure social life. In particular, information and communication networks constitute the basis for what Lash and Urry, drawing on sociological debates, call 'reflexivity' and the formation of new (reflexive) 'communities' or forms of association in contemporary societies. At this point of the argument it is useful to explain what is meant by reflexivity.

Reflexive modernization thesis

The reflexive modernisation thesis holds that inherent in modernisation is a process of self-reflection, a process in which modernity reflects on itself (Beck et al., 1994). At least for certain social groups, as societies modernise the self, too, increasingly becomes a reflexive self, that is, the self is increasingly unconstrained by social and cultural conventions defining one's identity and worldviews. This is a significant change with respect to pre-modern or early-modern stages of western societies. Whereas in pre-modern times individuals came into existence in a pre-given natural order, a world of tradition where norms and values had a binding moral content, in modernity individuals are forced to make decisions over ever increasing spheres of everyday life as such traditional social structures (class, family, religion, etc.) progressively lose their authoritative status.

This process of 'de-traditionalisation' is one of structural change in which agency is relatively set free from structure. It is a process in which one's sensibility or view of the world is detached from traditional structures and institutions and, under some circumstances, may become reflexive in developing a critical stance towards modernity itself. It is a process in which people may become more sophisticated in their ability to interpret the evolution of their, and other people's, social and natural environments. But this is not a process in which social structure ceases to be significant as a condition of existence for this new sensibility. A central argument of *Economies of Signs and Space* is that the retreating social structures are being substituted not by a lack of structure but by what Lash and Urry call information and communication structures and mobilities, a networked set of flows carrying diverse sorts of objects, bodies and information (signs) across the world.

Sociologists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) had described reflexive modernisation as a process of self-monitoring based on the greater access to knowledge circulating through information and communication structures. But besides this cognitive or rationalistic reflexivity, Lash and Urry recognize another important source of the modern sensibility or the modern 'self'. Along with knowledge (conceptual signs), in the flows of the informational and communicational structures other kinds of information such as images, sounds, narratives (mimetic signs) can also be found constituting the basis of an aesthetic reflexivity. Thus, individuals' experience of the world is mediated not only cognitively but also aesthetically. For Lash and Urry global flows of information, bodies and objects increasingly shape everyday routines, identities, and the emotional repertoire through which a person encounters the world. This is why human agency and subjectivity need to be understood in relation to the material and technological worlds which people inhabit. This argument has been developed further by John Urry in collaboration with Anthony

Elliott in their book *Mobile Lives* (2010).

Importantly, information and communication networks are also having *structuring* effects in the economy. Lash and Urry introduce the concept of 'reflexive accumulation' to emphasize that in disorganized capitalism knowledge, information and culture increasingly provide the basis for economic growth, that economies are increasingly service economies, and that culture and the aesthetic shape production as much as consumption. This is a key difference with *The End of Organized Capitalism* where culture appears only in the last chapter and plays a rather small role in the analysis (it is conceived of as an independent domain related to the economy only through the consumption patterns of the service class). As has just been noted, in *Economies of Signs and Space* culture is seen to infuse the economy, the economy analyzed is itself, to a large extent, a cultural economy, an economy of signs (information, images, symbols).

To summarize, Lash and Urry argue that the very mobility that helped to disorganize capitalism has also structuring effects, that those flows do not merely erode certain social and economic structures, but constitute the basis for new social and economic formations.

Conceptually, *Economies of Signs and Space* combines a sociology of reflexivity with a 'sociology of global flows':

'Unlike *The End of Organized Capitalism* which was a cross-national analysis of social-structural change, this book is an exercise in international social analysis. But if our sociology of flows has pointed to the constitution of a global 'we' [cosmopolitanism], the sociology of reflexivity, that is of aesthetic or hermeneutic reflexivity, has pointed to possibilities of local versions of the 'we' [local identities]'. (1994: 315)

In bringing together these two sociologies Lash and Urry are establishing a dialogue with three other thinkers of globalization: Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells. The dialogue with the first two is very explicit in the discussion about reflexive modernization. The dialogue with Castells is less explicit and revolves around the use of the concepts of flows and networks which Castells had also used in his *Informational City* in 1989. As noted earlier, these two sociologies are brought together through the term 'aesthetic reflexivity' which is central to their analysis.

On flows, class and inequality

Access to these flows which are the structural basis of reflexivity is also important in determining one's position in the social ladder. People and places disconnected from those networks of flows are left behind, excluded from relevant cultural and economic resources (capital), trapped in the low strata of the new class structure in the age of globalization:

'access to information and communication networks, as conditions of reflexivity, is a crucial determinant of class position. The 'wild zones' of very sparse lines, flows and networks tend to be where the underclasses, or at least the bottom third, of the 'two-thirds societies' are found. That is, place in the 'mode of information' rather than in the mode of production is the crucial factor in class position. Similarly the unusually densely networked centres of the global cities tend to be where the top fractions, in today's new informational bourgeoisie are primarily located.' (Lash and Urry 1994: 319)

A brief summary of the aim of Economies of Signs and Space

In the quote below, Lash and Urry elaborate on the aim of the book:

'In this book we have thus endeavoured to recast the categories by which contemporary societies are to be investigated. There are a number of conceptual innovations which imply the reordering of much of the conventional basis of Western social science.

We noted in the last chapter that the central feature of this social science has been the study of 'societies', each of which is seen as deriving its specific character from the particular relationship of nation and state. It was believed that members of a society share a particular community of fate, that they are governed by a state to which duties and responsibilities are owed and by which certain rights are guaranteed. In the analysis of such 'societies' it is presumed that most aspects of the lives of its members are determined by factors endogenous to the society; and that a fairly clear distinction can be drawn between these endogenous factors and those which are external.

This was the formulation bred from within the north Atlantic rim, since it is mainly there that there have been national societies which had the conceit to believe that they could in some sense govern themselves. And likewise a vibrant social science focused around the concept of relatively autonomous societies was produced from within those societies of conceit [...].

Now we are a little wiser. Issues of economic and social development for the vast majority of the world's population reveal anything but self-determination and autonomy. Likewise, the startling emergence of global environmental issues which know no national boundary, of 'risk societies', have shown that there is in a sense the 'end of the social'. By this we mean the end of societies with endogenously determined 'social structures'. We have analyzed in this book the processes which have deconstructed such endogenously determined societies. But this end of the social has in turn been brought about by some exceptionally powerful processes. The concept which we have adopted to analyse these processes is that of the flow. Castells states: 'There is a shift, in fact, away from the centrality of the

organizational unit to the network of information and decision. In other words, flows, rather than organizations, become the units of works, decision, and output accounting'. (Lash and Urry 1994: 320)

One of the criticisms of *Economies of Signs and Space* was that while the call for a sociology of global flows and networks sounds convincing, the book actually neglects the necessary methodological innovations. During the 2000s, much of Urry's work has focused on further developing the tools, both conceptual and methodological, for a sociology of global flows, especially, around the notion of 'mobility-systems'. During this decade seminal texts developing these tools are *Sociology beyond Societies* (2000), *Global Complexities* (2003) *The new mobilities paradigm* (journal article, with Mimi Sheller, 2006), *Mobilities* (2007) and *Mobile Lives* (2010).

To conclude, the aim of these two entries on the work of John Urry has been threefold. First, to show how his initial reflections on mobilities emerges from a concern with the spatial dynamics of capitalism. Second, to highlight his enduring concern with collective action and the centrality of this issue in his mobile sociology. Third, to illustrate a shift in analytical focus from a comparative analysis of national societies, to a sociology of global flows.

Few books age well. These two are 26 and 20 years old and surely some aspects of them are outdated. Yet in reading them today after the Great Recession and in the face of an impending ecological and energy crisis, one feels that, like good wine, their quality has only increased with time.

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