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

September 2013

British sociologist John Urry is recognized as one of the most authoritative voices arguing for a 'mobilities turn' in the social sciences. Books such as Sociology Beyond Societies (2000), Mobilities (2007) and Mobile Lives (2010) are regarded as milestones in the development of the mobilities turn and widely cited in many fields. However, important aspects of his work on mobilities were prefigured earlier in discussions about collective action and the restructuring of capitalism. This and the next entry of Café Braudel offer insights into this overlooked area of Urry's work so as to broaden our understanding of his thinking on mobile lives and mobility futures.

A life-long concern with space and social relations

Although Urry has spent his life at a single institution, his thinking has been 'on the move' namely in relation to changes in the world, shifting academic debates and also colleagues at Lancaster with whom he has collaborated such as Scott Lash, Phil Macnaughten, Elizabeth Shove, John Law, Bob Jessop and Kevin Hetherington, to name but a few. At a time when academic careers are increasingly made through ever-deeper specialization on single research topics and the construction of a 'brand name' around such issues, the evolution of Urry's interests may at first glance seem erratic: revolution, power, capitalism, regionalism, 'restructuring', place, tourism, environmental sociology, globalization, complexity theory, climate change, the body, mobility, finance, oil.

Urry's work offers many different readings and one may find multiple links between these varied topics. However, the relation between space and social relations emerges as a vital concern running through his forty-year career:

> *For many years I have been fascinated by what one could describe as the sociology of place. This developed out of a concern with how people actually experience social relations, both those which are relatively immediate and those which are much more distant, and how these intersect. (Urry 1995: 1) [...] sociology (apart from its urban specialism) has tended to pay insufficient and ineffective attention to the fact that social practices are spatially patterned, and that these patterns substantially affect these very social practices. (Urry 1995: 64)*

Writing about the dominant sense of the social presumed by sociology, he notes:

> *Societies were typically viewed as endogenous, as having their own social structures which were neither temporal nor spatial. Furthermore, societies were viewed as separate from each other and most of the processes of normative consensus, structural conflict or strategic conduct were conceptualized as internal to each society, whose boundaries were coterminous with the nation-state. (Urry 1995: 3)*

Space (and time) are now key concerns in sociology, but, as the quotes above indicate, this has not been the case for much of the twentieth century. In the UK it was namely in the 1980s when the so-called 'spatial turn' in the social sciences gained prominence partly facilitated by a number of intellectual innovations, partly encouraged by wider developments in the world. In Social Relations and Spatial Structures, a co-edited book published in 1985 bringing together prominent human geographers and sociologists such as Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Anthony Giddens, Edward Soja and Nigel Thrift, the human geographer Derek Gregory and John Urry refer to such wider developments:

> *the emergence of new spatial structures of combined and uneven development, particularly through the internationalization of production and the restructuring of the spatial division of labour; the changing structuration and significance of social relations, and the formation of class and non-class social movements, many of which are urban- or regionally-based; transformations in the temporal and spatial organization of everyday life, through profound revolutions in transport, communications and micro-electronics; and the heightened powers of states to maintain surveillance over distant and dispersed populations. As a result of these changes, spatial structure is now seen not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds, but rather as a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced. It is in this sense, perhaps, that human geography and sociology can be said to confront a common (if scarcely classical) 'problem of order. (Gregory and Urry 1985: 3)*

This concern with the relation between space and society infuses most of Urry's writings on power, capitalism and collective action (from the early 1970s), on the economic, social and political 'restructuring', especially its significance for the service industries, and spatial relocation of the so-called 'service-class' (from the mid-1980s), and on culture, identity,

modernity and travel (in the 1990s).

Urry's work can be seen as being in constant dialogue with other authors and research seeking also to develop this 'spatial turn' in the social sciences. The 'mobilities turn', in which Urry has been working for the last 20 years or so, can itself be seen as an extension or a particular articulation of the 'spatial turn'.

Urry's work from the late 1980s and 1990s

To understand some of the ways in which Urry has contributed to these debates one can focus on two texts: The End of Organized Capitalism (1987) and Economies of Signs and Space (1994). Some people consider these as Urry's most important books for the depth and sophistication of the argument and both are regarded as seminal contributions to globalization debates.

But why begin with these books and not Sociology beyond Societies, published later, in 2000, where he explicitly proposes a manifesto for a 21st century sociology based on 'mobilities'? There are various reasons for this.

First, these books illustrate a significant break in Urry's approach to 'the social'. The End of Organized Capitalism is a cross-national study, an example of what Ulrich Beck would call 'methodological nationalism'. Economies of Signs and Space, by contrast, is an attempt, still valid and illuminating in many respects after almost 20 years, to develop a 'sociology of global flows'. This is a crucial shift in the analytical lens which involves a shift also in the way of framing research. By looking at these two books together one can see more clearly why Urry understands the mobilities turn as a new paradigm, something not everyone agrees with or understands.

Second, one can also see more clearly the significance granted to the role of distance in collective action and, more generally, social relations. At an important level, the mobile sociology proposed by Urry can be understood as being inspired by, trying to understand more clearly, and helping to develop a 'global civil society', or, as he has put it more recently, a 'low-carbon civil society'. In this respect both books show the continuities with his earlier work on collective action, power and capitalism (see Reference Groups and the Theory of Revolution, 1973, and The Anatomy of Capitalist Societies, 1981).

Third, and closely related with the previous point, one can appreciate more clearly the link between subjectivity, inequality and mobility, a theme which is again dealt with more extensively in Mobilities (2007) and in his recent collaboration with Anthony Elliott, Mobile Lives (2010).

Fourth, despite the neglect in much mobilities research as to questions of governance and political economy, these two books show that the genesis of Urry's thinking about mobilities relates to the restructuring of western capitalism. This is important to understand his latest work on offshoring and energy. If, as explained below, Urry distinguishes, at the end of the 1980s, three phases in capitalism: 'liberal', 'organized' and 'disorganized', in his most recent work he talks about a 'post-disorganized' capitalism or 'resource capitalism'.

The 'end of organized capitalism' thesis

The End of Organized Capitalism is one of the first and most comprehensive analyses of the inter-related economic and social processes occurring at a local, national and international level that engendered what we now call globalization.

The 'end of organized capitalism' thesis relies on a three-stage evolution model of capitalist societies. Lash and Urry argue that by the end of the 19th century in most societies of the north Atlantic rim there was 'liberal capitalism', characterized by small local firms, a weak or loose organization of labour and weak state intervention. In liberal capitalism 'the circuits of different types of capital more or less operated on the level of the locality or region, often with relatively little intersection or overlap'.

This would change in the 20th century, especially during the interwar period. During this time and until the 1960s-1980s, capitalism became highly organized as the state, firms and labour sought to control economic processes on a national scale. In this period of 'organized capitalism',

> *money, the means of production, consumer commodities and labour power came to flow more significantly on a national scale. The advanced societies witnessed the appearance of the large bureaucratic firm, vertically and in some cases horizontally integrated nationally. There was also the replacement of locally based craft unions by industrial unions whose territorial bases were 'stretched' to cover national dimensions. Commodity markets, capital markets and even labour markets took on significance across the scope of the entire national economies.*

This form of capitalism created the conditions for its own transformation which has occurred through three parallel processes that Lash and Urry describe as 'internationalizing' processes, 'decentralizing' processes, and lastly, the growth of the 'service class'.

- Internationalizing processes: this includes processes that have transformed national societies 'from above' such as the emergence of global corporations and global finance (formation of new circuits of money independent from industry), both of which were increasingly operating away from the influence of individual nation states

states.

- Decentralizing processes: this involves processes that have weakened national societies 'from below' and includes changing geographies of industrial production and residential patterns, the decline of mass organizations (e.g. trade unions), the growing appeal of and strength of identity and local politics (as distinct from class-based and national interests and struggles).
- Growth of the service class: the quantitative growth and political influence of the service class (composed of those working in the public sector, professions, managerial posts, creative industries, etc.) has been pivotal in transforming societies from within.

> *By the end of the 20th century, the result of these processes had been the emergence of 'disorganized capitalism'. This stage of capitalism is characterized by a trend towards a 'de-concentration of capital within nation-states, the separation of banks, industry and the state, and the redistribution of relations of production and class-related residential patterns'. In this context, 'circuits of commodities, productive capital and money qualitatively stretch to become international in terms of increases in global trade, foreign direct investment and global movements of finance. This has taken place especially in the 1980s'. (Lash and Urry 1994: 2)*

Taking this periodification as an ideal model, Lash and Urry looked at the evolution of capitalism in five different countries: the USA, the UK, France, Germany and Sweden. No other study had yet looked at the three processes in their inter-relationship and from a cross-national perspective. They examined how in these societies these processes take place at different times and are combined in different forms giving way to a specific developmental path in each society.

Collective action and the centrality of spatial dynamics

It is important to note the centrality granted in the argument to the spatial dynamics of such processes. What follows is a rather lengthy quote, but worth including in full in order to appreciate, first, some of the continuities and differences between this book and Economies of Signs and Space, published seven years later, in 1994, and, second, the significance of the question of 'distance' in social life:

> *If the process of organization meant the spatial concentration of the means of production, distribution and social reproduction, disorganization has meant a spatial scattering or deconcentration of this gamut of social relations. This spatial scattering has been translated in terms of a decline of not just the city, but of the 'region' and the nation-state. It includes a process of, first, the spatial deconcentration of the various*

nation-state. It includes a process of, first, the spatial deconcentration of the various production processes within today's large firm. Second, of the disurbanization of the means of production, not just to the suburbs and Third World subsidiaries but to the countryside in the First World. Third, the disurbanization of the executive functions and of commercial capital. Fourth, the spatial scattering of the means of the means of collective consumption, which has meant the residential deconcentration of labour power, of the working class itself. Finally, the growth of the highly capitalized establishment –in industry, commerce, the services- and the corresponding decline in number of employees per workplace has resulted in the spatial deconcentration of labour on the shopfloor. One overriding consequence of all these spatial changes (and this for us is the key explanatory factor, though not ultimately the crucial determinant, of disorganized capitalism) is the decline of working class capacities'. 'Class capacities' are a matter not just of the numerical size of a class but the organizational and cultural resources at its disposal. Not only has the size of the working class and especially its 'core' declined in disorganized capitalism, but spatial scattering has meant the disruption of communication and organizational networks, resulting in an important diminution of class resources.

If the class capacities of the proletariat have been diminished in disorganized capitalism, the size and resources of the professional-managerial strata, or 'service class', have enormously increased. [...] The rise of service class, first and most dramatically in the USA, has been not just a function of the accumulation of capital (though it has been too), but has been a matter of engineers, managers, planners, social workers and so on creating space for their own class formation through the expansion of universities and professional associations (organizational resources) and through the development of arguments justifying their position in terms of superior education and expertise (cultural resources). The service class has in this process, partly as cause, partly as effect, been a considerable factor in the growth of higher education in disorganized capitalism. Our claim here is that the service class which is an effect or outgrowth of organized capitalism, is subsequently, largely through its self-formation, an important and driving factor in capitalism's disorganization process. Our comparative argument part rests on the time of appearance and size of the service class –hence much of our discussion is devoted to the American case- and in large part rests on the differing balance in the various countries of private-sector versus public-sector fractions of the class (1987: 10-11).

In this analysis a prominent role is granted, first, to the effects of economic change on the occupational structure (rise of the 'service class' and decline of working-class jobs and working-class mentality), and second, to the effects of the spatial scattering of the labour force on their organizational capacity in explaining the disorganization of civil society.

The organization of civil society is an issue that mobilities research has overlooked but which remains of special concern for Urry. For example, at the very end of his Sociology beyond Societies he notes the close links between mobilities as a research agenda and the growth of a global civil society:

> *[...] on that mediated public stage, many social groupings are appearing, developing partially, imperfectly and contingently, a kind of globalizing civil society. [...] And it is this set of social transformations that constitutes the social base for the sociology of mobilities that I have elaborated in this book. It is to be hoped that the social basis of a 'global civil society', and of its resulting 'sociology of mobilities', will come to occupy powerful places in the scapes and flows that are re-constituting the complex emergent global domains emerging in the twenty-first century. (Urry 2000: 211)*

This centrality of civil society is again evident in Urry's most recent analyses of oil and low-carbon futures. In Societies Beyond Oil: Oil Dregs and Social Futures, he places his hopes for a civilized, liveable future in 'the wide array of groups and organizations experimenting conceptually and practically with very many post-carbon alternatives' (2013: 237). Urry observes that

> *This emergent 'low-carbon civil society' is made up of tens of thousands of experiments, groups, networks, prototypes, laboratories, scientists, universities, designers and activities. Many involve making new connections between post-carbon practices developing around the world, partly through new digital worlds, including the vast App economy. This low-carbon civil society is developing preparedness for changes to come and trying to limit current processes, so making eventual outcomes less dire. This civil society is helping to realize preparedness and precaution in a world of ignorance and uncertainty as to what will or could or should work. (Urry 2013: 237)*

If The End of Organized Capitalism presented a rather bleak prospect for collective action, and Economies of Signs and Space, like a few other texts on globalization published from the early 1990s (see Appadurai 1990), was (at least slightly) less pessimistic partly due to the potential attributed to new communication and transport networks to nurture a cosmopolitan civil society, his more recent work seems again less optimistic. In Societies Beyond Oil Urry wonders whether this emerging 'low carbon civil society' could gain sufficient strength to successfully face the immense powers of carbon and finance capital to prevent a change towards low-carbon societies and economies.

> *Those powers [finance and carbon capital] are on such a scale and developing with such tremendous forward momentum that there are no sorcerers around able to understand or deal with the powers unleashed by finance. And there are certainly not up to doing so in time and on a sufficient scale worldwide. So other bleaker futures are likely given this dictatorship of global finance, which played such a dark role in [...] the Great Financial Crisis. (Urry 2013: 238-9)*

This entry has examined Urry's concern with space and social relations. It has introduced The End of Organized Capitalism and noted how collective action has been and continues

to be a constant in his work. The next entry of Café Braudel will continue the discussion of Urry's work by focusing on Economies of Signs and Space, a book that expands the analyses initiated with The End of Organized Capitalism but which also signals a significant break in the study of the social.

References

Appadurai, A. (1990) "Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy", Theory, Culture and Society, 7: 295-310.

Elliott, A. and Urry, J. (2010) Mobile Lives. London, Routledge.

Gregory, D. and Urry, J. (1985) Social Relations and Spatial Structures. London, Macmillan.

Urry, J. (1987) The End of Organized Capitalism. Oxford, Polity.

Urry, J. (1994) Economies of Signs and Space. London, Sage.

Urry, J. (1995) Consuming Places. London, Routledge.

Urry, J. (2000) Sociology Beyond Societies. London, Routledge.

Urry, J. (2007) Mobilities. Oxford, Polity.

Urry, J. (2013) Societies Beyond Oil. London, Zed.