

## **Exorbitant Mobilities? Commentary<sup>1</sup> to John Urry: *Networks on the move?***

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### **Summary**

This commentary raises two basic doubts concerning Urry's, and Axhausen's work on mobility: First, that it tends to underrate the importance of researcher commitment. I argue in favour of sustainable mobilities, of considering that we may be about to become over-mobile. Some examples of pressures brought to bear on research thus committed are discussed. Second, that it tends to overrate the satisfaction which travellers feel; a number of indications of travel-weariness, even displeasure. We tend to both love and hate travel, so both aspects should be discussed. Finally, a brief comment on the world's very numerous poor, who rather than enjoying travel and mobility are likely to experience not wanted immobility.

### **Globalisation and mobility**

Generally I hold in very high esteem John Urry's works, which I have been trying to follow for something like two decades. A near Sisyphean task, for as soon as you have finished reading one of his books, he has written another. Like the old Greek I do by all means carry on, yet for this occasion have concentrated on his recent papers – numerous but still shorter texts<sup>2</sup>. And as a token of said esteem, I have chosen a motto from Mimi Sheller and his "The Car and the City" for a recent paper of my own, called "Country and City in Transculturation" (2005, Norw. text). More important though is Urry's gift for lifting the field of mobility research, all too often reduced to mere trip counting etc., up to the level of civil

and political society, and indeed, trying to revise all of sociology in the process (e.g. Urry 2000) – very admirable indeed, although probably no less Sisyphean. The role of a discussant, however, is that of raising doubts, criticisms, so despite my general admiration, I have been trying to pinpoint a few. Basically there may be no more than two objections, that of (1) the ethics, commitment or concern of mobility scholars and studies, less or more general, and (2) of our preferences for travelling, both *en route* and on arrival, are they really and invariably so positive, and indeed, who are the ‘we’ behind the ‘our’ in ‘our preferences’? Both issues are found in Urry’s, or Axhausen and Urry’s, presentation but not at all specific for that; the issues are frequently discussed in the literature, not rarely in less cautious manner than they do.

### **Researcher commitment**

The general theme of this conference, of which this session is but one out of a total of 14, is Globalisation. Reasonable then to start sketching out what this theme covers; what is Globalisation? It is seen as a process or set of processes; as a concept; not, I think, as a phenomenon, or if so, of a most composite and diverse kind. And if my first name were Benedict, I might consider composing a text entitled ‘Imagined Globalisations’. Hence further, globalisation as an ideology, a euphemism<sup>3</sup>, and not least, as we were told last morning by prof. Gayatri Spivak, “globalisation is *an instrument*”, a proposition I found most inspiring. For some, still according to Spivak, globalisation is an instrument towards accumulation, for others an instrument towards redistribution.

Which raises the question of ethics, of ‘which side are we on?’ in the words of senior colleague Howard S. Becker (1967/2006), of being or not being committed researchers, of taking a stand on the themes we explore. Now, as many may have experienced, taking a stand is not always easy to combine with a continued successful career; it depends on the stands taken and how well they fit with the stands of colleagues, department heads, research finance agencies etc. Yet not less, stands taken also depend on how well they are argued, underpinned in facts, logic, methods, etc.

Opinions and stands are bound to differ. I for one hold no doubts that most solid arguments – too many to be listed here – may be advanced for Spivak’s idea of seeing globalisation, including the manifold mobilities it comprises, as an instrument towards redistribution, not (only) accumulation<sup>4</sup>. This is not to say that sound arguments can not be found for the other side; only that it is a continuing debate, perfectly legitimate and well worth engaging in from both sides.

So briefly, the stand I favour is well expressed by colleague Karl Georg Høyer's title, *Sustainable Mobilities* (2000). We might even consider calling it *limits* to mobilities, although as a title that does have a seventyish ring. Not of course in the sense that we as scientists may set and impose such limits – that would call for super-Sisyphean forces. But we could, and should continue working towards the increasingly solid underpinning of like stands, even if it may go 'against the grain' for years and perhaps for decades to come.

Considerable pressure may be brought to bear on such efforts, however. I suspect that this may explain, for example, the case of US historian James J. Flink, who published his *The Car Culture* in 1975, followed by *The Automobile Age*, a much more tractable title, 13 years later – in his own words, he is "...far less polemical here". For less well-known efforts such as prof. Høyer's and my own, disregard and eventually oblivion is perhaps the more likely fate. To be polemical, however, is not an aim, only to be clearly outspoken. And in discussions, as against in polemics, we have the haughty, perhaps, yet very well known ideals set for us by Habermas (1981), that of a *herrschaftsfreie* (approx. non-authoritarian) discussions, hopefully attainable even between discussants very unlike in social and economic power.

Or take the little-known case of Carlo Ripa de Meana, former commissioner of transportation of the European Union, who while in office proposed a really solid underpinning of new perspectives, published in 1991, helped by a great team of engineers and other scientists, most notable among whom is probably another Italian, Fabio Maria Ciuffini<sup>5</sup>. This report, entitled *Projet de recherche pour une ville sans voitures* contains over 200 pages of most well-argued propositions for change, costly yet practically applicable in the short and longer run. But what happened? Their report, it appears, was never translated into English or other languages, and hardly distributed in the French version. And shortly after, de Meana was out of his EU commissioner position, the official version being that he accepted a position as Minister of the environment in his native Italy. So a *herrschaftsfreie* discussion never came about in this case, only a 'non-discussion', if we dare paraphrase the more current term, 'non-decisions'.

My own greatest fear is that the increase in global mobility, present and projected, may very slowly and gradually lead us into a state approaching *entropy*, the fading of all difference. Although less often heard, I think that in the longer run this argument will carry more weight than the more frequently heard arguments concerning the environment, climate change, pollution, accidents fatal or maiming etc., however important all these are. The substances of mobility, be they persons, (other) matter, or messages, symbols, risk fading into more and more of

indistinctness. Avoiding such an entropy-like outcome should be proposed as a goal for social change, for globalisation as redistribution.

Anyhow, there is evidence (e.g. de Meana's), overlooked or denied by some, that mass private motoring is grossly unsuitable, especially for urban mobility.

Or is it rather a case of chaos theory, or even a state of chaos without any theory? We move and mingle a lot, yet regularly almost at random it would seem; we rarely touch and encounter in any fundamental sense, cf. the findings of Nynäs below, of mobilities as if 'in space suits'. Speaking phenomenologically, an impression that really strikes the senses is frequently what we experience during metropolitan rush hours. In Danish, rush hours are known as *myldretid*, a word deriving from Greek *myrmex*, an ant, hence an ant-like behaviour. They have the same word in French, *fourmillement*, teeming or swarming, like insects or schools of fish, only they prefer the more neutral *heures d'affluence* in official language.

## **Love or hate of travelling**

Now for the second doubt I want to raise: to what extent do we really want to and enjoy travelling? And who are 'we', no matter our measure of enjoyment or its opposite?

A Finnish colleague<sup>6</sup> whom I met for a seminar at the Sorbonne a few years ago, said, spontaneously and with great personal commitment, as an outburst following very recent air etc. travel: "I hate travelling!" Soon after he added, "But I love arrival!" As spontaneously, I would tend to agree on my own personal level and leave it at that. But on reflection, this little anecdote really raises the question of travel preferences, be they for moving, arriving – or for staying. For doubts may be raised concerning the latter as well as the former; for the present, suffice to quote Nobel laureate Naipaul's title *The enigma of arrival*.

I would also remind you of old C. N. Parkinson (1962), a serious economist yet a great humorist, his advice on how to finally break an aging boss: Send him or her on a round-the-globe air trip, crossing numerous time zones with lots of meetings on the way. Back home again s/he is likely to be totally exasperated, an easy prey for aspiring subordinates eager for advance.

So to what extent does travelling people really like, enjoy, take pleasure in that activity? Consider air travel alone, purportedly the most 'modern' form. A pleasure, yes, sometimes, but as or more often also strenuous, crowded, involving long terminal walks and waiting hours, dragging heavy pieces of luggage along, etc.

Nobody really likes that, evidenced by the fact that remedies are slowly starting to appear, such as that some hotels and town terminals now allow for the checking in of luggage from their lobbies or from city stations, not at the airport. In civil airfare's early days this was entirely different. Going by air was 'instant distinction' with few and mostly equally distinguished fellow travellers; today air terminals are often as crowded and cramped as any tube rush-hour station (and there you rarely carry heavy luggage).

So if you really manage to like 'terminal stress' the likely reason is that you are thinking of other, distant things, such as escaping from everyday routine or looking forward to exiting adventures later. Or enjoying tax-free shopping (despite its extra weight), although now this is increasingly done at arrival, not departure terminals.

In sociological terms, the cultural idea of travel as pleasure can be seen as a case of Ogburn's (1950, 1964) *cultural lag*, the idea that most of material culture changes more easily than do basic attitudes, 'deep immaterial culture'. Travel has always, like most pleasures perhaps, been mixed, enjoyment and strain. But decades and centuries ago it was still a costly rarity, a privilege for the rich and privileged only; then, travel preferably at leisure provided instant distinction. Something of the fascination of the Enlightenment's 'Grand Tour' tradition of Goethe etc. has spilled over, remaining in force even today – a hysteresis, sort of. As a subjective feeling not much is left of that today, yet the cultural attitude does lag on, reinforced by the efforts of global tourist industry publicity. Nobody seems to ask whether the present travelling multitude learns or creates on a level comparable to the pioneer 'Grand Tour' travellers as a result. Chances are they do not.

As for private car travel, a more scientifically founded example is found in the work of M. C. Dix et al.'s *Car Use. A Social and Economic Study*, a large-scale Oxford based survey published back in 1983. Among its conclusions are "...the concept of pleasure motoring seems to be moribund" (p. xxiii), and further, that mobility should be regarded as a cost, not as a benefit. But of course, this was well before the arrival of media favourites such as *Top Gear* on TV and the flourishing of car brand exposures so regular in contemporary motion pictures, videos, DVDs: 'We must hide that the car is a bore, so let's cast it as drama, action, the car chase' etc.

Consider further the case of French world famous liberal newspaper *Le Monde*. They were among the pioneers of publishing air pollution forecasts on a daily basis, from the early nineties if not even earlier. Every day for years there was on their weather page a nice little picture of the Eiffel tower, shaded in ten categories ranking from *excellent* to *très mauvais* and *exécration*, the worst cove-

ring the whole tower in dark grey. Then all of the sudden – I certainly did not see any reasons given – their tower indicator disappeared. And guess what came in its place – not in exactly the same place, of course, in a different part of the paper and given much more space – yes, editorial car model coverage, with nice colour photos, in this paper which introduced pictures, colour or black-and-white, reluctantly and later than most. And at another discreet distance, large car ads – of course once again.

My colleagues the trip counters assure me that statistically, the average daily time use for travel has been remarkably constant for a century if not more. In the first place, this constant is a minor proportion of waking hours, something like an hour a day. Of course, we travel very much longer distances today than a generation or two back. Yet if we really enjoy it so much, should we not expect the time use to increase as well? It is, I suppose, the experience of being on the move while safe and at ease which pleases, not the distances covered in themselves.

Or maybe many of us suffer from pure *technophilia*, an immoderate love and fascination of just about any new technology – not ‘serial monogamy’ or infatuation yet not unlike it; from one fascination to the next in rapid succession.<sup>7</sup>

There is a question of the reliability of like time use statistics, whether there are accurate figures to be found at all over periods that long. And it may well be that exceptions are not too uncommon for some; take politicians, pop musicians, athletes, business executives etc. whose average travel time use is very likely to have increased. Yet my guess is that to the extent they like it, it is for the prestige receptions that wait at their journeys’ ends, not or not much for the time spent on the move.

Now for the enigma or enigmas of arrival. Take a conference such as this, a fairly usual type of event: Arriving, meeting colleagues, greeting acquaintances old as well as new is certainly pleasing, but rarely entirely or totally so. For it does involve challenges, strains, plenty of hard work and the paying of close attention, striving to ‘keep abreast’ – Goffman’s ‘impression management’ and ‘face work’. Urry relies on Granovetter’s (1973) well-known idea, ‘the strength of weak ties’, according to which we learn more from distant persons, as close ones tend to have no news for us anymore. This may be modified, however, by the even older idea of mobilities being a conflux of so-called pull and push factors – we both seek to avoid something and to acquire something as a result of our moves. Applying this to Granovetter and our conference example, it may well be that distant colleagues can teach us more. However, *if* the closer colleagues had new ideas for us after all, we would have to acknowledge them as, in this respect and perhaps more generally, local superiors. So for example it is much more convenient to learn from an

Urry in Lancaster than from my next-door office neighbours back home in Oslo. This does possibly not weaken Granovetter's model, it only adds to it, introducing motives and agency, not only the original ties, nodes, distances and flux. Unfortunately there is no room for a closer discussion of Granovetter's influential ideas here; that will have to await later publication.

I am also reminded of a finding of Peter Blau's (1955), where legal consultants in a Government office tended to avoid asking advice from colleagues they knew could provide the best expertise. In Blau's interpretation this is taken to be because non- or lesser experts knew they would not be able to reciprocate. Very likely, yet the 'common' colleagues might also be reluctant about reinforcing hierarchy at their workplace.

Finally now, I would like to quote from a quite different great favourite of mine, author Ernest Hemingway, another Nobel laureate by the way. One of his less pretentious short text is called "Monologue to the Maestro", his advice to an aspiring, young and somewhat maladroit wannabe author. Hem says: "Most people never listen. Nor do they observe" – as something to avoid, of course. It was interesting to learn that another participant of this session, Dr. Peter Nynäs (2005a & b) of Åbo/Turkku, Finland, concludes in partial agreement; his young Finnish electrical engineers working abroad wear, figuratively speaking, "space suits" through which local cultures rarely penetrate.

### **Not wanted *immobilities***

So much for not wanted or not really liked mobilities. A short final word now on quite another problem, that of not wanted *immobilities*: If you are a poor labourer, or a poor small peasant in a poor country, you would probably, given a little knowledge, be eager to move your labour force or your crops, to richer, better paying countries. A few do try and succeed, but the difficulties are such as to probably deter much greater numbers. Tariff rates favouring rich county products or labour has often been blamed. But even where these are negligible great obstacles remain. It transpired recently that should a small Malawian farmer try to sell his or her maize, coffee or tobacco crop to Norway s/he would encounter, not tariff walls but lot and lots of other rules and regulations having to do with quality, health, regularity etc.

To say nothing of the really big issue for diminishing not wanted non-mobilities; that of languages. So I end on a similar note, or rather a similar quote, as than with which I began, from prof. Spivak's address (from my notes):

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Globalisation's redistributive interest can only be realised by an imaginative mind... We have to go into the lingual memory of a people.<sup>8</sup>

Which takes, of course, lots of imagination, and no less lots of patience. And since patience in the longer run all too easily tends to change into resignation, we should actively keep training ourselves, as persons and as researchers, maintaining both activities, imagination and creativity, and a patience never dulled into resignation.

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It may of course seem unfair to voice such criticisms against the cautious and fairly moderate conclusions of researchers such as Axhausen and Urry, and certainly many more deserving targets do exist. But this was my one invited occasion, so I took it, with apologies, supported possibly by the graveness of the problems discussed. Apologies perhaps also to the trip counters; they do lots of important and useful work, yet tend, lamentably, to be restricted with what I call the institutional doxa of their employers, their research institutes.

Finally as for Axhausen and Urry I feel, in sum, that they put much too much stress on the *demand pull* factors of increasing mobilities, and much too little on *supply push* factors. In the terms of Economics, mobility is supply driven, not only demand driven. Replacing these concepts from a neighbouring discipline with more subtle and nuanced ones rooted in sociology will unfortunately also have to await later, more extensive publication.

## Notes

1. Invited commentary to a session of the *Navigating Globalization Conference*, at NTNU, Trondheim, 4-6th Aug 2005. Session name *Social and Ethical Aspects of Mobility in the Globalization Process*, chair Dr. Erling Holden, NTNU and Oxford.
2. Some of his recent books and papers are listed in the bibliography below.
3. Indeed, however surprising, conservative and erudite US historian Fergusson (2004) argues that very point, globalisation as he sees it is nothing but a euphemism for imperialism, the main fault of current imperialism's leading power being its weak dedication; it should stand faster, strike harder.
4. I would have liked her idea even more had it been for equalisation, not only redistribution – she very likely is, even if not explicitly here. The two are not the same, as any serious student of Ricardo's so-called theory of relative advantage must see (cf. Otnes 2004:202). There is no guarantee that the difference in wealth or income between two parties to an exchange, one poor, one rich, will diminish even if both gain from it. The difference may even increase, and keep increasing. Consider Samuelson's example, the best lawyer in town who is also the best typist: If he hires a typist and pays her (sic)



more than the going wage rate, both will be better off but the income difference between lawyers and typists is unlikely to decrease as a result.

5. Ciuffini's more recent works, notably *Transport and Public Spaces: The Connective Tissue of the Sustainable City*, was published as part III of the *Perceive-Conceive-Achieve* series from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin, Ireland – i.e. similar work may have been confined to a periphery – where they yet may have inspired a following, cf. McDonald&Nix (2005).
6. It happened to be Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen, of Helsinki University. The locus classicus for this statement is of course Claude Lévi-Strauss, the opening sentence, p. 3 of his *Tristes tropiques* (1955), 'je haïs les voyages et les explorateurs'.
7. As a rather less than scientific instance consider character Toad from Graham's *The Wind in the Willows*: Having happily acquired a nice Gypsy horse wagon he encounters a very first automobile. Instantly leaving the wagon, he sits by the roadside muttering over and over again 'toot-toot, toot-toot'. And not long after he is a feared car road hog himself.
8. Spivak refers to Alton Becker (2000), the last period being a quote from his *Beyond Translation*.

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