



Book Review

Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

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William Bogard

Department of Sociology, Whitman College. Mail to: bogard@whitman.edu.

John Urry's book on mobilities weaves together many threads of his long running project to rethink society from the perspective of movement and its supports, rather than through static analytical categories. The book begins by asserting that everything today seems to be on the move. If people are not necessarily traveling more, they are going farther and faster, along physical as well as electronic paths. The speed and scope of modern travel has qualitatively changed how we live, and fundamentally altered the tempos and rhythms of social life. Urry rightly claims that we need new theories and methods, drawn from resources beyond those developed by traditional sociology, to comprehend the kinds of travel afforded by modern systems of transportation and communication. What the book does retain from traditional social science reflects Urry's ongoing concerns with the impact of various mobilities on class, race and gender hierarchies. He demonstrates throughout how different systems of movement, from paths to cars to the internet, have both sedimented social inequalities and opened up possibilities for political freedom. They have affected the way we can think about basic problems of identity formation, subjectivity, and the boundaries of social groups.

Urry detects a "mobility turn" in contemporary theoretical, methodological and empirical work that is post-disciplinary and eclectic, viewing his own work as an effort at a "systematic elaboration" of what he envisages as a new "mobilities paradigm" that reorients the way we think about the nature and production of society. Urry draws on the etymology of mobility and its multiple references, from simple movements of things and people, to mobs and crowds, socioeconomic mobilities, and migrations that can also include flows of information, images and ideas. He proposes a set of new rules for a "mobile" social method that develops appropriate concepts and means for researching the diverse and increasingly networked movements that constitute the contemporary world and change its conditions of freedom and governance. The new mobilities engender new forms of sociability that both replace and augment basic possibilities and contexts of interaction, including face to face communication, situations of co-presence, and the ready-to-handedness of technologies of self formation and identification.

Urry's book is divided into sections that detail the theoretical and methodological implications of his mobility paradigm, examine the historical, present and imaginative modes of moving and communicating, investigate how mobilities are changing our sense of space and place, time, social connectivity, and are collapsing dualities of distance and proximity, closeness and remoteness.

Perhaps the key parts of the book have to do with Urry's synthesis of a mobilities paradigm (which has spawned a major research effort on mobilities at Lancaster University, where Urry teaches). The paradigm is generated from a very eclectic and diverse collection of materials ranging from Simmel's writings on "paths" and metropolitan life's affect on sensibility, to Prigogine's ideas on complexity and non-linear systems, Heidegger's meditations on technology and the phenomenology of time, Deleuze and Guattari's nomadism, contrasting theories of sedentarism, investigations of motility (defined as the "potential" for

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mobility), complexity and catastrophe theories, and so on. His method can at first seem rhizomatic, but in fact Urry rejects rhizomatics in favor of a systematic, if nonetheless complex and mobile, approach to understanding the multiplicity of increasingly networked travels that connect us to each other today. This accounts for his emphasis on the concept of “systems” of mobility throughout the book, rather than “assemblages” (an idea more Deleuzian), to account for the multiplicity of flows of people, objects, ideas and information across the planet. I will return to this briefly below. In any case, Urry proposes that the new mobilities paradigm fundamentally alters the direction and nature of mainstream social scientific research, indeed of our very conception of society. Throughout most of the book, Urry’s writing takes on a complexity that mirrors his subject. He incorporates virtually everything that comes his way. Sometimes his acceptance of so many different, and at times conflicting theoretical and methodological resources, blunts the critical edge of his work, but in its openness to the multiple ways of thinking about mobility he also manages to persuade the reader of the intellectual and political necessity of this approach to grasp the current global system of movements on its own terms.

For this reader, who admits a greater kinship with Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to movement and becoming, the most contestable idea in Urry’s book is his concept of “mobility systems,” a paradoxically immobile concept at the heart of a work so singularly focused on movement and travel. Urry notes that mobility systems create the potential for movement, as in the paradigmatic example of a path which, though it is a relatively fixed structure, affords the possibility for walking, a basic form of travel (Urry draws heavily on the economic theory of affordances). Much of the book is spent on the historical and theoretical analysis of these mobility systems (roads, airports, rail systems, communication networks, etc.) and their implications for inequality. Although he recognizes that mobility systems are themselves constituted through variable mobilities (as a footpath is itself the effect of repeated walking), and in that sense are effects as much as causes, the fact that he chooses primarily to concentrate on the immobile supports of movement creates a theoretical tension in his work. Sometimes this tension seems at odds with his intention to place mobilities at the forefront of his analysis, but it is in the end consistent with his rejection of the analysis of movement from the point of view of either nomadism or sedentarism, both of which I think he regards as unrealistic and unable to account for the actual, material and imperfectly controlled flows of persons, objects, ideas and information across the globe. His use of the term “system” is deliberate and offered as the best way to theorize how movement is governed in the current world order. From my point of view, however, the Deleuzian/Guattarian notion of “assemblage” better models the processes of controlling the complexities of contemporary forms of movement, since assemblages emerge from mobilities and express the problem of governmentality as itself constituted and organized by mobilities. Urry wants to maintain the critique of governmentality, but I think instead winds up adopting some of its conceptual supports.

In any case, despite my disagreement over philosophical starting points, Urry’s book is a prodigious, innovative, and necessary effort to confront and ultimately resist the ways modern power operates in an age of global mobility.