

# Размышления над книгой

## The Urry's global mobilities concept: some comments and considerations

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*The article offers some critical comments on well-known global mobility concepts developed by John Urry. Firstly, the article outlines the four key points of this concept including the analysis of other possible forms of mobility. Secondly, the article sets forth and analyses some dialectical contradictions of the above concept. Thirdly, it assesses the ways and forms of the possible transformations of social sciences generated by the global mobility phenomenon. Fourthly, the article reveals and critically evaluates the actual changes and the forthcoming difficulties of the decision-making process, especially on an international level. Fifthly, the article outlines a set of other challenges to social theorists generated by the global mobilities phenomenon. Sixthly, the article analyses aspects of man in the mobile and computerized world. Lastly, it considers the relationships between the mobile world and its a fixed natural and social environment.*

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### On the concept of global mobility

One preliminary note: Since there is so much literature on the mobility in the global age, I have restricted my analysis to the ideas summed up in the Urry's book «Mobilities» (Urry, 2008) and by few others. I realize that in doing so I may miss something important within this all-embracing theme of theorizing and field-research but such «focused analysis» is the only way to concentrate on the key aspects of the mobilities phenomenon. Nevertheless, I should mention some works which are directly related to the issue in question. In my view, the shortest list of them is the following: (Adey, 2006; Bauman, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2011; Knorr, Cetina, 2005; Kravchenko, 2015; North, 1990; Urry, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008; Wallerstein, 1996; Yanitsky, 2009, 2010, 2010a).

J. Urry stated that the entire world has become «movable» (Urry, 2008, p. 4–6). People, information, materials, drugs, guns, alcohol, counterfeit and even pirated products are now on the move «This movement of people and objects is hugely significant for the global environment with transport accounting for one-third of total carbon dioxide emissions». «Many other «environmental» consequences follow from the growth of mass mobilities: reduced air quality; increased noise, smell and visual intrusion; ozone depletion; social fragmentation; and many medical consequences of «accidental» deaths and injuries, asthma and obesity». In addition, «virtual communications and mobile telephony is calling into being new ways of interacting and communicating within and across societies, especially with some less-

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developed societies jumping directly to mobile rather than landline telephony and computing» (Urry, 2008, p. 5).

As concerns for the scientific roots of his concept, Urry argues that 'In developing analysis of hybrid systems and their uncertain futures I mobilize some ideas from the complexity sciences. These have been used to examine especially the non-linear properties of systems as they move unpredictably and irreversibly away from point of equilibrium. Overall, I see mobility systems as a subset of powerful, interdependent knowledge-based systems that organized production, consumption, travel and communications round the world. These systems, almost all software-based, ensure and make it seem unexceptional that products can be purchased, meetings will happen, components will arrive at the factory, plains will be waiting, messages will get through, money will arrive and so on. These systems make repetitive or iterative actions possible and mostly happen without much cognitive thought. They produce regular and repetitive «spaces of anticipation» distributing economies, peoples, activities across the world» (Urry, 2008, p. 273). Here I would like to recall the very simple maxima: to consume means to destroy, as once Z. Bauman noted.

Urry distinguished four kinds of mobility. First, mobility means that something «moves or is capable of movement, as with the iconic mobile (portable) phone but also with the mobile person, home, hospital, kitchen, etc» (Urry, 2008, p. 7). Second, «there is the sense of mobile as a *mob*, a rabble or an unruly crowd. The mob is seen as disorderly precisely because it is mobile, not fully fixed within boundaries and therefore needs to be tracked and socially regulated». Third, «there is a sense of mobility deployed in mainstream sociology/social science. This is upward or downward social mobility». Fourthly, «there is mobility in the longer term sense of migration or other kinds of semi-permanent geographical movement» (Urry, 2008, p. 8).

This article is written in the form of dialogue with some critical remarks of my own. I have done it consciously because I saw a worrying trend in modern sociology: an overwhelming majority of authors have only mentioned (enumerated) the works of other authors on this topic but they very seldom entered into polemics with them.

### **Dialectical contradictions of the mobility concept**

My first point would be the following: firstly, a world as a hybrid system cannot be uncertain, non-linear and inherently contradictory and simultaneously workable and productive. It is a *contradictio in adjecto*. The real world in which we live is full of risks, accidents, local and regional wars, refugees, homeless and deaths. It is not accidental that Urry tried to avoid the problem of global risks (or more correctly, all-embracing risks) limiting his analysis to an issue of safe «aeromobility» (Urry, 2008, p. 139–149). He introduced the notion of «disorganized capitalism» but has applied it again to the issue of safe air-communication. Second, the ultimate goal of global stakeholders is not to «harmonize» global social order but to organize a governed chaos and by means of it have access to cheap labour power or to limited natural resources. Third, no one among these stakeholders is concerned about the by-products of such forced actions, be it contaminated soil and air or the «wastes peoples» (Z. Bauman). Four, the recovery time of natural and human ecosystems is much longer than the next onslaught on these systems. Five, Urry liked to refer to physics but there are biological sciences as well. He stated that stability in the world ecosystem depends on the diversity of its numerous subsystems. Current overall growth mobility leads towards the opposite direction. Six and most importantly, the Urry's concept (paradigm) of overall mobilities implicitly implicates that the world is a self-governed system. Does it mean that any international organizations like the UN and its numerous divisions are not necessary? Seven, Urry totally eliminated the notion of conflict from his mobile world concept.

But this is not all: there are many other kinds of mobility. First, mobility is understood to be the various forms of exchange between man and nature as well as within the socio-bio-technical

system created by man. Second, there is a sense of social metabolism as such, i.e. an endless process of exchange of information, goods as well as of 'strikes' between persons, social groups, states and their alliances, etc. Third, a rather complicated process of exchange between the real and the virtual world exists. Fourth, what is about the mobility of social institutions and the comparison of their mobility with the mobilities of other agents of the global world? Fifth, Urry considered the above four kinds of mobility referring to particular actors (persons, mobs, science, etc.) and said nothing about the very machinery of the global world's mobility as such and its feedback on the sociobiotechnical system and its inhabitants. Sixth, the other side of the same coin is the changing proportion between «good» and «bad» (for people and nature) produced by the growth of all-embracing mobility. Seventh, and may be the most important: it is now obvious that the whole system of decision-making (the monitoring, gathering of relevant information and its processing, compiling expert groups, etc.) is now far behind other kinds of mobilities. How do we overcome this gap? As one can observe, the current trend would be to computerize the process; a process which has already begun, but who will be the developer of «soft» — this is a key question.

Eight, Urry was right speaking about «war machines» (Urry, 2008, p. 95). But this problem cannot be restricted by the question of their emergence and placement. The mobility of people, resources, information, troops, etc. makes the social world more and more vulnerable and therefore a more sophisticated means of defense has been developed. As a result, an arms race is intensified. Ninth, another important notion within the Urry's concept is a «network capital» (Urry, 2008, p. 194–203). Its main components are as follows: «the economic, the physical, the organizational, and the temporal» (Urry, 2008, p. 194). But modern networks are *socially constructed systems*. They have been constructed by the global stakeholders and in their interests. If one looks «bottom-up» that is from the viewpoint of the least-developed countries, he/she will see the insurmountable barrier between the creators of these networks and its users in these countries. The poorer countries cannot directly be included into the modern global network. Tenth, the more people who become mobile, the less attention will be paid to nature protection. Moreover, the majority of people have already been uprooted, economically, socially and culturally. The notion of the Motherland is losing its sense. This notion has been replaced by the economic term: reasonable living conditions according to his/her living standards. The care for nature has become a kind of tax. If you pay taxes you are free from the responsibility of looking after nature. Eleventh, what is to be done with those who are still absolutely illiterate and immobile? Or with those who are accustomed to living on relief or on humanitarian aid? Or, finally, with those who are computer illiterate for religious reasons? Twelfth, «when things go wrong in systems where the flows of materials are quick and complex, then the consequences can be unpredictable, difficult to control, and likely to ramify unpredictably throughout the system» (Perrow 1999; Law 2006). When something goes wrong it goes wrong very quickly. A complex system with such rapid flows, normal accidents are always waiting to happen as they did in the case with beasts, micro-organisms, people, money, trucks and feed moving around in ways that are complex and often too fast for intervention. The barriers holding the flow back were unreliable.

### **Mobility transforms social sciences**

Urry stated that 'mobilities transform social sciences. «Mobilities make it different. They are not merely to be added to static or structural analysis. They require a wholesale revision of the ways in which social phenomena have been historically examined» (Urry, 2008, p. 44). «And what the mobilities paradigm emphasizes is that the objects that are ready to hand are highly varied, providing different affordances, especially many variably enabling or presupposing movement» (Urry, 2008, p. 45). Urry named this shift as a move to «post-human epoch»: «We have



never been simply «human»» (Urry, 2008, p. 45). Urry referred to Knorr Cetina's statement that «the biological sciences are encouraging the move away from the ideas of the Enlightenment towards an idea of individual perfectibility and enhancement, a shift from? humans to a perfect life» (Urry, 2008, p. 46). Urry referred to Latour's idea that «social relations are never only fixed or located in place but are, to very varying degree, s constituted through «circulating entities»» (Urry, 2008, p. 46). Up to now, the social sciences presume a «metaphysics of presence» as Urry called it. But recently there are «multiple forms of «imagined presence» occurring through objects, people, information and images travelling, carrying connections across, and into, multiple other social spaces... Presence is thus intermittent, achieved, performed and always interdependent with other processes of connection and communication» (Urry, 2008, p. 47). Thus, *the interdependent mobilities produce social life*. Urry distinguished five main types of mobility: the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, migration, etc., the physical movement of objects, the imaginative travel, the virtual travel, and the communicative travel through person-to-person messages. «This new paradigm... emphasizes the complex assemblage between these different mobilities that may make and contingently maintain social connections across varied and multiply distances» (Urry, 2008, p. 48). Here Urry follows the B. Latour's idea that all social relations are constituted through circulated entities.

But there is the other side of the coin. According to my calculations, about one half of the world population is immobile and fixed to a specific place. Even in Russia about two thirds of its inhabitants are fixed to a particular locality or, at best, commute between their permanent home and place of work, usually to the capital or big cities. Yes, they watch TV and have I-phones but this does not mean that they participate in the multisided mobile world. Russian sociologists call them resource-less people because mobility is an important social resource. Such inequality is not a product of exploitation but the result of huge spatial dimensions of our country. Internet communication is an indispensable prerequisite of the modernizing process but the internet cannot totally replace face-to-face interactions. Besides, if local residents become commuters it leads to the sense of loss of the Motherland, and this is dangerous for both, their place of permanent residence and the place of their part-time or free-lance work. I am not sure that local ties should be forcefully replaced by the invasion of the internet communication and all-embracing mobility. The mass of uprooted people with no place of permanent residence is a threat for both natural and social ecosystems. As we see now in the EU, the mass invasion of migrant flow brings nothing but instability and growing institutional conflicts between the member states as well as between newcomers and the indigenous population. I believe that the majority of the world population is in need of peace, shelter and education amongst other resources in order to exist.

Finally, Urry spoke in support of a convergence of social and natural sciences. The emergent organizations are the key phenomenon (trend, shift). As Urry stated, the «*Gulbenkian Commission on Restructuring of Social Sciences* argues that we should dissolve the boundaries between «natural» and «social» science through seeing both characterized by «complexity» (Urry, 2008, p. 26). Analysis «based on the dynamics of non-equilibria, with its emphasis on multiple futures, bifurcation and choice, historical dependence, and...intrinsic and inherent uncertainty should be the «model for *all* social sciences» (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 61). Natural scientists call the complex systems *metastable* ones whereas I call them 'temporally stable' or inherently unstable (movable).

### Decision-making in a mobile world

First of all, some words about the essence of ongoing changes. There is a gap between the increasing speed of the mobility of events, goods, information, people, etc. and the decreasing pace of decision-making and processes of their implementation is well explained by the

laws (principles, regularities) of capital accumulation. Such in-between period, i.e. between the ceasing fire, truce and the beginning of restoration/rehabilitation processes, is a field for economic and political bargaining. That is why I consider any increase of the speed of global mobility as a potential global risk or as a movement towards an even more risky world.

Recently, there has been a substantial shift in the decision-making process. At the end of and after the WWII, global and sub-continental decisions like those made at the Yalta Conference (1945) have had a long-term effect. The decisions made at Yalta, despite the Cold war, have been more or less maintained despite the ever-growing competition of the two superpowers. At that time, minor forces and superpower satellites had acted with caution. In the modern world there are neither superpowers nor «*simple systems*» at all. There are super-complex systems compiled from the diversity of elements. Thus, if the world is a 'hybrid' of interaction of super-complex and mobile systems, the decision-making process must be of a «hybrid» and mobile character.

Consequently, the above process cannot be «final». These days any decision-making is a long process. Recently, this process is the only one phase of an endless process of social metabolism and not of «interactions» only. This means that a whole institute of decision-making should be reconsidered and restructured. If we look again at the Minsk-agreements and their implementation or at the Syria-decision-making processes, we will see that they have already *endless* and *metabolic* character. Later on, these processes might be re-named but their continuing and *metabolic* character remains the same. More than that, as we can see, any modern making process is not linear. On the contrary, it is full of stops, bifurcations and feedbacks (reversal movements). Finally, any global decision-making process has acquired an endless character. It means, in turn, that *the institute of permanent decision-making has emerged*, as each social institution has begun to produce its own rules of games (ethics, norms, codes, etc.) and to impose them on the real political process.

All this returns us to the idea that the above process as interdisciplinary and problem-oriented. But it is not all. An *all-embracing risk society means the all-time decision-making society*. There is another contradiction: the mobility of information, people, goods, etc. is speeding up like a spiral whereas the traditional model — monitoring-information processing-decision-making-implementation-control — remains the same. It is obvious that it must be modernized, but in which way? Who is capable of offering a new decision-making model? And who will be the «leader»? Logically, it seems that it should be a «concert» but the current experience of collective decision-making shows that it is far behind from the real speed and complexity of current historical process (wars and conflicts of interests). However, secrecy is a serious impediment to this way. Would a mega computer be needed to do all of this? But in whose hands will be the process of soft-making? The task is aggravated by the fact that today any mobility may be politically constructed. How in this case the IT-decision-making machine could reveal such man-made mobility. It seems that it is a vicious circle.

### Challenges to social theorists

There is an ongoing relationship between movable actors and mobile environment. All processes in the world have become movable. This shift urges the turn to «a different way of thinking through the character of economic, social and political relationships. Such a turn is spreading in and through the social sciences, mobilizing analyses that have been historically static, fixed and concerned with predominantly spatial «social structures»» (Urry, 2009, p. 479). The necessity of taking into account the results of various disciplines led Urry to conclusion that «*The mobility turn is post-disciplinary*» one (Urry, 2008, p. 6), that is, the multidisciplinary. This statement is rather important but insufficient. Earlier, I said that every environment has its own carrying capacity. This statement is true to a relatively stable environment, first of all natural.



But today both the notions — the actor and its environment — are rather relative because they are both social actors. The more any «environment» consists of movable people, things, information processes, etc. the more actors turn into an «environment» and vice versa. Indeed, those who are looking «top-down» consider those who are somewhere below as an «environment». And for local people, municipalities, infrastructures, etc. those who are at the top are seen as their environment because they not only real actors but those who are establishing the rules of the games.

### **Man in the mobile and computerized world**

There are positive and negative effects of this. On the one hand, an individual is potentially included in a global world, i.e. it is all accessible to him, his/her communicative opportunities enormously expand. His/her opportunities for spatial mobility are growing every day. It is said that the world is in your hands. On the other hand, actually it is not a real access because it requires a variety of resources. But if an individual has them it is not sufficient because the above *mobile world has its own social order*. And the main producer of the rules of this order is the media. It imposes a lot of norms of «proper» behaviour on an individual's will. Gradually, it turns out that the virtual world is much narrower than material one. Even more than that, a more or less harmonious picture of a 'real' world shaped by family, school and devoted friends is sharply replaced by a virtual picture which is collage-like and therefore of a inherently partial and contradictory character. Too little information is as harmful as too much. Then the individual is forced to become subjected to the proper TV-pictures «imprinted» in his or her consciousness. As a result, the individual feels that they are in a race to achieve an illusory wellbeing. Of course, it is not a matter of global stakeholders. And it is the Trojan horse of the virtual civilization: all control levers are in the hands of these stakeholders. In the frames of the IT-civilization the gap between the young and the old is widening every day since the former are more mobile, mentally and spatially, more sensitive to any novelties and radical ideas and less exposed to traditions and rules of the past; they are more inclined to action rather than to reflection. The direct contact with a diversity of qualities of nature (visual impressions, smell, sounds, etc.) is replaced by a one-to-one contact with a TV picture accompanied by artificially constructed sounds.

There are other important issues of man-social environment relations, namely the right of spatial mobility. Urry refers to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights which stated three kinds of such rights: «to leave any country, including one's own; to return to one's country; and to have freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state» (Urry, 2008, p. 205). Similar EU objectives are declared in the Maastricht Treaty and in the Amsterdam Treaty (Urry, 2008, p. 205). It is obvious now that these declarations are only words. The EU and the US as well as other countries, have a lot of particular restrictions for such «universal» spatial mobility. The current migrant crisis in the US gives numerous examples of the restriction of such mobility ranging from multisided forms of «selection» to building walls against migrant flow.

### **What about a natural and man-made environment?**

First, as one can see from the whole text of Urry's book, the environment and its «mobilities» are not the focal point of his analysis. Once again, the author is a follower of the man — nature dichotomy, and therefore analyses some particular areas of hybrid mobilities (for example, taerial communication). The environmental problems of such extra-complex entities as the socio-biotechnical systems do not interest the author. Second, the guiding idea of the text that the world is (or sooner or later will become) totally mobile is an overstatement. To my mind, the very idea of total mobility is wrong, if it has no point of departure and destination. The author

cited D. North (1990) who stated that the institutions can produce a long term irreversibility that is: «both more predictable and more difficult to reverse» (Urry, 2008, p. 278) but has not followed this methodological principle. Third, the earth environment is double-sided, it is place-fixed and at the same time mobile, spatially and in the form of man-nature and man-man metabolisms. As we can observe the violation of this «mobility-stability» balance has already led to global risks (for example, to global warming). Four, all mobile actors are strictly bound to their place-fixed infrastructures (roads, and oil pipelines, airports, railway stations, harbors, etc.). Of course, in time these infrastructures could be resettled or even abandoned. But it does not change the common rule: the interdependence of place-less and place-fixed processes. Five, the natural environment has its own regularities of change or/and replacement. But the more this environment becomes man-made the more it will be subjected to social rules of mobility. This rule is correct for any cultivated setting ranging from individual gardens to giant fields for grain farming. Six, actually all kinds of mobile devices are not universal but destined to particular geographical and climatic zones. It is one more restriction of all-embracing mobility. Seven and seems the most important, all major global and regional natural ecosystems such as oceans, seas, rivers, forests, etc. are indispensable producers and supporters of life on our planet. The very existence of them for a long time has made human history possible. Therefore, there is a principled difference between «may be» and «must be». Eight, the land-fixed infrastructures such as roads, railways, harbours, stocks as well as any kind of power plants, hospitals, museums, sport, and recreation facilities, local and biosphere reserves, etc. might be virtually accessible but not spatially movable. Ten, the global metabolism that is the turnover of substances and energy in the biosphere is permanently occurring, but it is a constant turnover which changes very slowly. Thus, for people it is a rather stable global system. Finally, the forced speeding-up of any mobility which is permanently produced by such an institution is harmful for mankind because it means that man is always in a hurried state and therefore has less time to think and to reflect.

### **Conclusion with discussion**

First, the mobilities concept developed by Urry undoubtedly represents a substantial input in the world sociology. Urry bases his concept on developing the analysis of systems and their futures which are simultaneously mobile, «hybrid» and super-complex. He emphasises that this mobile and super-complex movement of people and objects is hugely significant for the global environment. But later on, he pays very little attention to this impact. Nevertheless, it is only one side of the problem because if there is «only mobility» it means chaos, the Brownian motion. Therefore, the other essential feature of modern society is the existence of various immobile structures such as values, norms, rules, beliefs, etc. It is true, they are also mobile but they are changing at a much slower pace. The contradiction of these immobile structures means the absence of culture as an indispensable prerequisite of the existence of any organism.

Second, Urry has stated that the entire world has become «movable», and distinguished four main kinds of the mobility phenomenon. In my view, it is important but not sufficient because there are numerous kinds and forms of mobility. There is the man-nature metabolism as well as the social metabolism as such, changing proportions between the «good» and «bad» production, between real and virtual worlds, an issue of changing forms of dialogue between man and machine, between the speeding up of social processes and the rather slow processes of decision-making, etc. And one more very significant question: does this mobility have any limits, and if so, which ones are they?

Third, in my interpretation, the concept in question is based on the presumption of overall and steady growing mobility and therefore on the all-embracing market concept which permanently generates various forms of mobility. Implicitly, it means that this mobility represents



a «good» for the humanity. But nobody has asked the billions of people round the world if they want this all-embracing mobility? Are they well-informed about its current and future consequences? And what would be the price which these billions ready to pay for being submissive to this mobile world?

Four, what is almost completely missing in the above concept is the issue of struggle in its various forms: a dialogue, competition, conflict and war. It means in turn, that this concept has missed one of the key drivers of any forms of mobility. Or in other words, the concept of the actors of this movement has been missed. This issue returns us to the previous point. Namely, there are a set of questions, say, the speed of mobility? It is with which one exactly? If it is concerned with speed — what are its limits? Or is it occurring about the effect of 25th sequence?

Five, natural and social systems have genetically and historically shaped the speed of life processes. As human history has shown, any attempts at artificially speeding up biological and social transformations often led to negative results. I do not know why Urry has kept «natural» and socially constructed transformations (social movements, revolts, revolutions, genetic engineering) of long-term as well as from short-term analyses. But it is obvious that such generally accepted forms of ceasing fire and easing social and political tension are the discussions that are necessarily meant to slow-down the overall mobility processes.

Six, it is unfortunate that Urry has not paid much attention to the environmental problems in the mobile world. The problems of such extra-complex entities as the socio-biotechnical systems are beyond the author's focal point of interest. I realize that Urry strived first of all to substantiate and explicate the mobilities phenomenon. Nevertheless, Urry could not avoid the existence of such global giant spatially-fixed ecosystems as oceans, seas, forests, rivers, deserts, etc. which are indispensable producers and supporters of life on our planet. He could not also avoid the analysis of various economic and political systems such as states their unions and alliances, and a variety of international organizations. The matter is that these systems are not the «spaces» covered by airplanes but *these systems are actors* as well. The global metabolism, that is the turnover of substances and energy in the biosphere, is regularly occurring, but for people it is a rather stable global system.

Seven, it is rather indicative that the genre of theorizing as critical analysis has almost disappeared from western sociology. There are many and various research streams and schools but without critical comparisons and discussions. Sometimes it seems to me that some sociologists are afraid of «critical social science»! (Sayer, 2009). Does it mean that western sociology is only 'mobile' but not reflective as it was in the past? And one more general question: has our sociological community has been transformed into the society of «loners»? If it is true, it is one more achievement of modern capitalism and its all-embracing marketization process (Burawoy, 2015).

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