

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDU

John Urry, *Mobilities*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2007, 336 pp. \$US 27.95 paper (978-0-7456-3419-7), \$US 64.95 hard-cover (978-0-7456-3418-0)

The mobilities paradigm has been a long time coming. The great age of movement, of the train, the cinema, and the automobile, is now over a hundred years old and social science has been unable, except in fits and starts, to develop research and theories which place the mobile at the centre of its agenda. It was in relation to the cultural restlessness of that era that Simmel suggested that motion was overcoming form as the paradigmatic metaphor for modern times. Today, mobility is on the agenda, with researchers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Manuel Castells, each emphasizing the need to rethink the social world by putting movement, flows, and the very evanescence of social life at the forefront of sociology.

In *Mobilities*, John Urry has set himself the rather daunting task of presenting this latest paradigm shift in the social sciences. Urry's singular task is to work through the implications that this shift to mobility has for sociology and to move the discussion away from two earlier, sociologically incomplete, elaborations. One of these is the exclusively theoretical elaboration that is isolated from situated research and often seems adrift in a world of the abstract imaginary. The other is the research which moves the discussion from technology toward the social world in a linear and unreflexive manner that simply does not respond to the complex ways that technology is socially mediated. Urry's task then, is to present the mobilities paradigm in such a way that it is rooted in and responsive to the complexities of social life and takes into account the critical sociological issues of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, and difference in ability.

Urry's task is daunting not simply because of this comprehensive agenda, but because the sheer volume of research related to this agenda is enormous. While I will not attempt it, I suspect it would be easier to list those areas of research that are not affected by, or are irrelevant to, the shift to a mobilities paradigm than those that are. Partly as a result of this, the book is seriously flawed at the level of execution. I will not bother the reader with a discussion of various aesthetic issues which may simply be a matter of personal taste, although the most serious of these,

Urry's penchant for lists, at least deserves a mention. There are dozens and dozens of lists in the book: lists of types of cars, lists of novelists who write about cars, lists of films about cars, lists of communication devices, lists of backgrounds in the natural world, and lists of places where the family goes on holiday, just to name a few. The book also needs a good proofread and edit as it is full of awkward sentence constructions, missing words and plurals, or simply annoying mistakes such as "a something" or "that that." It is hard not to get the impression that there was undue haste in the production and/or writing process. Or perhaps, in a speeded-up and mobile world, there is no longer time for proofreading.

Putting these issues aside, Urry has produced an uneven opus. Truly insightful in places, elsewhere, as the preponderance of lists suggests, the book is merely a pedestrian summary of volumes of research evincing no particular direction and lacking a firm theoretical framework. While he has tackled some of this in his earlier *Sociology beyond Societies*, the mobile itself remains undertheorized and it feels as if Urry has taken a step back from that earlier and more challenging effort. While Urry explores concepts such as the network, complexity theory, and the small worlds literature, the mobile itself is given short shrift. So, while the centre of Urry's research agenda is the mobilized social world, the centre of his theoretical agenda lies in these areas related to the mobilized world. Perhaps Urry is having the same problem theorizing the mobile that he is intent on correcting.

On the other hand, there are places where Urry shows us precisely the kind of book this could have been. In Chapter 8, he discusses the complex relationship between various mobility technologies and the differential social ties amongst members of these technologically mediated social networks. Given their impersonal and general level, text messaging invitations, for example, can go out to a far wider social group than one-to-one phone calls, thus extending social bonds from the inviter to weakly linked members of a particular network. We saw this in the college party on the White House lawn after the recent US election, which was described as a spontaneous cell phone, text-messaging event. In Chapter 9, "Gates to Heaven and Hell," Urry details the relationship and nuances between the mobilities paradigm and questions of social stratification and exclusion. He discusses the ways in which mobility and access to mobility creates new forms of social exclusion as both the right and ability to move/escape a situation reinscribes preexisting social inequalities. Moreover, he offers us the general caveat, modeled on Marx's distinction between the social relations of production and the forces of production themselves, that we should be focused on the social relations of mobility without fetishizing the various forms of mobility themselves.

Urry goes so far as to suggest that networks are inherently aristocratic as hubs and nodes tend towards consolidation and rearranging rather than altering the existing hierarchies of social domination.

To suggest a paradigm shift, as Urry does, implies the need for new ideas and, at the same time, that the old ideas cannot fathom changing realities. While Urry's overall scheme is sound and he is undoubtedly more sober than many others, his forays into complexity theory and the network literature never take flight, and never clearly show why the mobilities paradigm is necessary. Or, in other words, why these theories by themselves aren't enough to solve the problems which they investigate. On the other hand, Urry's ability to sift through vast and disparate literatures and show their relevance to a sociology driven by the mobilities paradigm certainly demonstrates the scope of the question. In this respect, the greatest strength of the book is Urry's ability to carry through on his promise of presenting a mobile sociology that does not lose sight of the central issues of sociology, albeit in a transformed manner.

John Urry's *Mobilities* promises a new paradigm for the social sciences. Here and there we can catch glimpses of a brilliant book which would set the social sciences on a new, mobile footing capable of working with a variegated logic, moving with an increasingly fluid and complex subject matter and, at the same time, bringing a stringent, critical analysis to the study of this ever more fluid social world. While the book does not quite fulfill this promise, it does provide an important, if unevenly executed, contribution.

TRENT UNIVERSITY

ALEX FERENTZY

Alex Ferentzy is assistant professor of sociology at Trent University in Oshawa. His current research is on Bergson's critique of abstract space and its influence on Lukàcs, Althusser, and Foucault. alexferentzy@trentu.ca