BOOK REVIEW:

MOBILE LIVES
Anthony Elliott and John Urry, Routledge, 188pp, £25.99 (pbk)
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According to Anthony Elliott and John Urry, everyday life in the twenty-first century is characterised by new forms of mobility. Complex travel systems and rapid development of digital technologies are features of globalisation that have been previously articulated in Urry’s work *Mobilities* (Urry, 2007). *Mobile Lives* is a book of seven chapters written in an erudite but highly accessible style, providing rich description of twenty-first century mobile lives and culminating in a concluding chapter and afterword which adopts a speculative and creative but also reasoned assessment of possible post-carbon rather than post-modern futures. The material brought together in this volume demonstrates the success of the authors’ assertion that the mobilities paradigm can be extended to analyse the formation of identity and the experience of everyday life.

The discussion engages with some of the biggest names in social theory over recent years: Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Pierre Bourdieu. Focusing on identity and personal relationships, the authors argue that Giddens et al. miss the fact that individualised, gendered, reflexive identities are also ‘mobile in relationship (sic) to conceptions of the self, to others and the social world’ (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 96). Emotional, intimate and also professional relationships are increasingly practiced at a distance; work often demands travel, forcing people into ‘distance relationships’ (ibid.: 85). The book demonstrates the ways in which individual identity and relationships are made, re-made and sustained through the use of digital and networked communications technologies and reveals how ‘cut and paste’ selves (ibid.: 5) are being stretched physiologically and
psychologically. It is argued that the psychic and emotional impacts associated with globalisation are neglected in social theory and the authors remedy this by paying special attention to the investigation of subjective experience, which adds a crucial psychosocial dimension. This makes the book important for anyone interested in contemporary social and emotional life.

Building on *Mobilities* and also Elliott’s previous work (with Charles Lemert) *The New Individualism* (Elliott and Lemert, 2006), the reader is introduced to a new and convincing conceptual language. The book utilises an approach previously used by Elliott amalgamating several interviews into fictionalised narratives displaying complex and contradictory subjective experiences of academics, global financiers, and business executives. Terms such as ‘portable personhood’, ‘miniaturised mobilities’, ‘affect storage’, ‘network capital’ and ‘meetingness’, are used to explain how identity is ‘fundamentally recast’ in the process of movement. Inextricably linked with this is the recognition that software driven digitalised systems of mobility exert new demands upon subjectivity and precipitate psychic reorganisation.

The use of miniaturised mobilities such as laptops and mobile phones make ‘intimacy at a distance’ possible and this is one of the topics examined in chapters two and five. The conventional sender-receiver wisdom about communications technologies is challenged and a persuasive argument is made about the ways in which identity and emotional life are transformed through the use of these technologies. Equally, these technologies facilitate new sexualities and spaces where intimate relationships are practiced, although these are not always available on equal terms. It is argued that these technologies can never be free of the ‘emotions, anxieties and conflicts of the individuals which use them’ (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 41). The authors make effective use of ideas from object relations theorists, Wilfred Bion and Christopher Bollas, and demonstrate impressively the effective contribution that psychoanalysis can bring to understanding media technologies. This represents a significant leap forward for media, communication and audience studies as well as social psychology.

The ‘Technological Unconscious’ (ibid.: 33) is invoked in a discussion of miniaturised mobilities which are used to access affects, memories, dreams, desires and anxieties that are deposited, stored and retrieved whilst on the move, which the authors refer to as ‘affect storage’. The transitional qualities of miniaturised mobilities and their ability to contain anxiety are elaborated. This represents one side of the coin. The flip-side, which is not as fully developed, is the specific way in which these technologies might generate
anxiety: how does it feel to have to be always contactable, unable to switch the phone or Internet off? How does the working parent feel when confronted by a crying child with a problem when only physical presence will comfort and soothe?

Whilst the book is about ‘movement’, the authors stress that movement in itself is less significant than the social relations it creates. Networking is an established feature of twenty-first century language but its psychosocial meaning is elaborated, following Bourdieu (1986), through the concept of ‘network capital’ (ibid.: 9). This is a complex communications-driven and information-based form of capital possessed by individuals with high levels of geographical mobility, who have ‘extensive institutional contacts’ (ibid.: 11) and are part of ever expanding network fields. Network capital translates into wealth, power and privilege. In societies that have shifted from neighbourhood door-to-door based interactions to those which are based on person-to-person or networked communities, face-to-face meetings take on new significance. Being connected involves long distance travel for intense and fleeting meetings, which cement the weaker networked connections. Being ‘seen’ physically as well as technologically networked (‘on the email’) has become a relentless requirement not without emotional consequences. This is also an area of gendered inequality.

Those most successfully networked are marked by their ultra mobility and large amounts of network capital and were first described by Bauman (1998) as ‘Globals’, also identified by the authors of this volume as a new class of super-elites (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 65). Chapter six explores spaces of excess such as Dubai, where those high in network capital seek ‘experiences’; in fact, culture more generally is increasingly focused and organised around ‘themed’ experiences (theme parks, casinos, specialised resorts, sex tourism) which appeal to people of all classes to re-invent themselves.

Elliott and Urry note that this class are a ‘miniscule elite’ (2010: 82) yet their lifestyles permeate popular culture. Their significance is ideological because they embody the neoliberal coveted values of ‘swiftness, speed, weightlessness, dexterity and flexibility’ (2010: 82), which act as a pressure for all. The authors challenge the myth that the lives of the Globals are anxiety-free and contented. A sobering thought, but it is difficult to feel sympathy for this disconnected and privileged class.

If there is a weakness in this book it is that it pays too much homage to acclaimed male theorists and overlooks equally significant work of female theorists who work psychosocially, for instance Sasha Roseneil’s (2006) work on intimate relationships and Lynn Layton’s work on the normative unconscious (2002). This would have enhanced the
Discussion on intimacy and professional anxiety. It would be disingenuous to suggest the authors have ignored gender, as throughout they are alert to the correlated inequalities associated with ‘gendered mobilities’. They note that mobility is always in relationship to immobility: of those who service the mobile; who clean the hotels and airports; move baggage, and look after the children of ‘life in the fast lane’ professionals, who have no power or ability to move out of the poverty in which they live. Similarly, the authors remain aware that the stories of immigrants, asylum seekers, sex traffic victims and refugees, for whom geographical movement is neither liberating nor desired, may have resulted from poverty or social unrest.

I sensed that the mobile lives of those featured as case studies were perhaps more familiar to the authors and provided a more seductive and captivating account. I found myself fascinated and unnerved as I read those. Their more comfortable lives make easier reading than the narratives of the immobile and dispossessed. Perhaps that should be the subject of the authors’ next book?

Pondering future scenarios it is impossible to ignore that, as I write this review, British cities are besieged by hundreds of young people rioting and looting shops. Unlike middle-eastern countries whose recent disturbances have called for democracy and jobs for young people this protest seems to have voiced no demands. Clearly, one of the issues here involved consumption, and the desire to possess symbolically meaningful material objects; why else would youths steal handfuls of shoes for the left foot only? We are also faced with young people who are not immune from the changes the authors describe as they appear to lack connection to physical localities and neighbourhood communities. Elliott and Urry conclude that the ‘carbon-fuelled hubris’ of twentieth century capitalism has left an environmental legacy making unbridled consumption for all unsustainable. In the face of dwindling resources and unfeasible desire for material goods in an increasingly unstable climate, this book offers valuable concepts and ideas that can help define and delineate some present and some possible futures.

This book will be of interest to social scientists, geographers, media and communication theorists and therapists, and demonstrates that an interdisciplinary and psychosocial approach to the effects of globalisation and the impact of digital and network communications technology can produce a sophisticated understanding of identity and contemporary society.
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References