

# MOBILITY, TIME AND THE GOOD LIFE

John Urry

Dept of Sociology, Lancaster University

Paris, April 2002

## Introduction

This paper developed out of UK debates on congestion/workplace charging<sup>1</sup>. I argue that forms of charging cannot be understood 'on their own' and separate from the evolving character of urban life and especially from a significant array of contextual 'social' processes that affect travel. I further argue that there are contested notions of time implicit within many aspects of travel and transportation and these need to be identified and distinguished. The paper ends by some drawing out some implications of time and co-presence for the mobility and ethics, noting inter alia that congestion is not necessarily a bad.

## Social Determinants of Travel

I begin with various contextual processes. First, much of the time it is not in fact necessary for people physically to travel since there are many other forms of communication available to effect connections. These include the letter, telegram, telephone, email, video conference, text messaging, radio, television and so on. Indeed the 'necessity' of travel was significantly highlighted by September 11th with its apparent effects in substantially reducing domestic air travel within the US. It seemed that a variety of alternatives to physical travel were available.

The key notion in explaining why travel is on occasions felt to be necessary is the 'compulsion to proximity', that people largely travel in order to be co-present with others for certain periods of time (see Urry 2002). Travel is embodied and as a result people are physically co-present with work-mates, business colleagues, friends, partner or family, or they bodily encounter some particular landscape or townscape, or are physically present at a particular live event. In other words travel result in intermittent moments or intermittent periods of physical proximity to particular peoples, places or events and that this proximity is felt to be obligatory, appropriate or desirable. It is not a matter of choice on that occasion. Why is this?

In relationship to other people, this 'thick' co-presence involves rich, multi-layered and dense conversations (see Boden and Molotch 1994). Co-presence especially affords eye contact with the other that can establish intimacy and trust. Face-to-face conversations enable the talking through of problems, especially the unmediated telling of 'troubles'. In such conversations topics can come and go, misunderstandings can be corrected, and commitment and sincerity can be directly assessed. Especially important is how this enables the building up of trust, something that gets worked at and involves a joint performance by those in such co-present conversations. Also to be physically co-present can reveal the lack of trust, that somebody is not to be believed, that the deal should not be done.

Participants travel to meet together, at work but in many other contexts. People commit themselves to remain there for the duration of the interaction, and each uses and handles the timing of utterances and silences to 'talk'. There is an expectation of mutual attentiveness and this is especially the case within 'meetings'. Such meetings can often be multi-functional, for making decisions, seeing how one is heard, executing standard procedures and duties, distributing rewards, status and blame, reinforcing friendship as well as distance, judging commitment, having an enjoyable time and so on. Research shows that managers in the US spend up to half of their time in face-to-face meetings and much of their time lies in working with and evaluating colleagues through extensive physical co-presence (Boden and Molotch 1994: 272).

This reflects the apparent shift within how organisations work, from the 'individual work ethic' to the 'collective team ethic' in which face-to-face social and leadership skills are especially valued. The higher the position in an organisational hierarchy the more significant is establishing and nurturing

'complex networks', where unwritten and informal co-presence is especially salient. Such networks also facilitate the 'inadvertent' meetings that happen because like-minded people from similar social networks are informally encountered, in certain parts of towns or cities, on golf courses, campuses, cafes, bars, conferences and so on. Where people live geographically distant from each other, then sites of 'informal co-presence' will be regularly travelled to. Research on the City of London in particular also shows how its intense communicative role has by no means disappeared and if anything has been enhanced, with those in financial services regularly travelling to meet up often in informal 'thirdspaces' for quality time (see Boden 2000).

Some other social processes affecting contemporary travel flows include changing household composition with there now being many more, smaller household units. There is some growth of computer-mediated home-working. There are increasingly global migration patterns with families strung out across the world. Leisure changes involve many more shorter visits being made to other places. There is some development of e-commerce. Computer-mediated communications are deconstructing organisations that were once huge centres of work and enforced proximity that resulted in massive 'rush hours'. Now organisational relations are most significantly made with consumers and this involves branding and 'navigation'. Neither of these demands the physical unity and organisational hierarchy of very large numbers of workers working within a single 'co-present' site with the resulting works trains or buses (see Evans and Wurstler 2000: 107-9). All these processes change the possibilities of, and need for, intermittent co-presence that travel can afford.

Different modes of transport are not merely functional choices but reflect different 'social' choices. What can be called 'social distinctions' play an important role in modal choice and this can vary greatly across different cities and regions. With what Graham and Marvin term 'splintering urbanism', the rich and well-connected increasingly seeking more selective and tailored transportation options that are relatively segmented off from the mass of the population (such as the Heathrow Express rather than the Piccadilly line to get to Heathrow; see 2001).

There are also complex connections between the flows of people and the transporting of goods. Changes in the urban infrastructure will involve changes in the transport of goods, to shops, households, factories, offices, wholesalers and so on. But where goods go, people may also go, as with out-of-town shopping centres. Alternatively, people and goods may travel in different patterns, if say goods are delivered to the doorstep following a telephone or internet order. The equipment within a household affects these intersecting flows of people and goods.

Finally, the flows of people necessitate both the mobility and the immobility of vehicles. All transport systems generate major problems when their machines are immobile, as they have to be for significant periods of time, partly to allow access, as at stations, car parks, airports and docks, and partly for longer term storage. Issues involved include where such machines should be kept, whose land and resources are involved, how much should be paid for such 'parking spaces', who has access to such spaces, and what happens to these access and storage spaces when they are empty of their designated users.

### Travel and Time

One consequence of the importance of co-presence is that there are various 'hotspots' where space and time combine together, at so-called rush hours but which also involve what might be called 'rush places'. Some such rush hours/places stem from how travel patterns come to be 'locked in' to people's patterns of life. There is a long-term 'household path dependency' that means that modal choices are not simply a matter of short term individual household calculation but involve long-term commitment and obligation. These household path-dependencies involve living near rail or road links and that this decision then commits the household members to a range of other commitments, to travel to specific schools, shops, workplaces and so on. And each of these 'locked in' travel patterns typically happen at certain moments of the day/night. Thus what seem like relatively superficial journey patterns, happening at certain rush hours say, can often stem from long-term household path

dependency. These lock in that household and its members to travel to certain places at certain times, creating the momentous rush hours and rush places that appear to define certain urban cities and towns, that can make some such places seem unbearably congested.

Further, there are very different time-scapes involved in various transport infrastructures. There is the long-term infrastructural immobility of motorways, junctions, slip roads, underpasses, bridges and tunnels, as roads/cars connect almost all significant places in 'western societies' to everywhere else. These infrastructures based on the average size of cars/lorries historically derive from the shape of the horse drawn carriage. They are built for at least 4 people (although according to Putnam 70% of journeys in the US involve 'driving alone': 2000). The extent, range and impact of such infrastructures are becoming more and more extensive and increasingly interlocked with other infrastructures, especially those organising informational flows (Graham and Marvin 2001).

Changes to a transportation infrastructure can take an exceptional long-time to occur. So while businesses and residents of an area may demand improvements in relationship to their perceived short-term needs, the design, consultation, planning and implementation of major infrastructural changes can take decades (such as the Channel tunnel rail link, Terminal 5 at Heathrow: Vigar 2002: chap 5). Thus there often is a contradiction between an instantaneous demand for improvement, and the lengthy timescapes involved in the actual implementation. This further means that the 'improvement' once built is no longer relevant to new perceived requirements.

Moreover, there is the politics of time. Taking time, saving time or rescheduling tasks within time are central to all transportation systems. Many infrastructural improvements result from the unequal politics of time whereby certain social groups convince policy-makers or private companies that their time and its scheduling is so important and needs to be saved (such as the reduction of car journey times by 2 minutes if a particular by-pass gets built). Different social groups politically organise around the importance of their time or the time of some other social group or around the claim that they have to travel at particular moments of time (rush hour, dinner time, holiday time and so on).

But also all transportation systems involve waiting. Yet different social groups are variably willing or able to 'wait', and demand and get very different conditions in which to wait. With the growth of a splintering urbanism and a 'galactic metropolis' there are marked differences between groups and their increasingly segregated travel experiences (Graham and Marvin 2000: 228). There are exceptional differences between the VIP airport lounge and the uncovered, unsafe, unlit and 'non-smart' bus stop. The politics of time and waiting are central to the patterning of social inclusion and exclusion within an area. The more socially excluded a group the more their time patterns will involve time-inflexibility, much longer periods of waiting in less safe and provisioned environments, and what could be called 'time-dependence'.

A further aspect is the need for temporal co-ordination. For 'transportation' to be improved within an area and hence that the social exclusion of certain groups may get reduced, then many other changes have to be implemented in a temporally coherent fashion. Thus alongside congestion charging schemes, other developments should occur in such urban environments, often before or at least at the same time as the demand reduction strategy. But these changes typically involve many other 'organisations' whose time-frames and financial 'interests' may be inconsistent with each other. These organisations can range from the local governing party that may lose majority status at the next council elections, to train companies facing a loss of franchise, to bus companies pursuing a long-term global strategy, to professional engineers concerned to build roads for the long-term and so on. Moreover, developing a mobility infrastructure is partially iterative so that changes takes place in such a way that commitment to changed priorities occurs so as to build up support for changes over a significant period of time.

There are also periods of storage implicated within all transportation infrastructures. There are temporary moments of rest at traffic lights, roundabouts, jams, dropping off points, as the car

prepares for its next mobile phase, taking up space and burning fuel and producing carbon deposits as it waits to take off again. But more significant are the shortish periods of storage when cars are stationary for a few hours or overnight. Cars have to be housed when they are not in motion. In many societies each car may 'own' two or more geographically distant parking places, one outside its home, the other at its place of work (with others outside various third spaces). Up to half the land in large urban centres is given over to car only environments that are much of the time actually unoccupied. Cars are the ultimate mono-crop because nothing else can grow in such environments of 'car parks' even when they are not present (which they are for most of the time). Allocating these places and periods of temporary storage is of course immensely contested, with 'market' and 'rationing' systems being variously deployed.

More generally, the last century or so involved the spread of many just-in-time 'familial machines'. Family household members dwell in close proximity to these machines, that include white-space goods, telephone, radio, household TV/VCR, the PC, heating appliances, the camera/camcorder, and especially the family car. Such machines are mainly stored within the home or garage and help to form twentieth century family life. Family members could operate most of these domesticated machines and they do not require special expertise (in the case of the car a license that can be acquired by any 17 year old). Such machines are stored in or by the home so they are accessible, they come to life when the family requires them and not when experts or the state determines. Their use depends upon personalised or familial time and not upon the objective, public timetable of the railway or airline.

Such family machines are 'ready-to-hand', just-in-time for the family members to use. They are based upon flexible family time. Such temporal flexibility enables the car-driver and passengers to travel at speed, at any time in any direction along the complex road systems of western societies linking together most houses, workplaces and leisure sites. Cars extend where people can go to and hence what they are able to do. Much of what many people now think of as 'social life' could not be undertaken without the temporal flexibilities of the car and its availability 24 hours a day. It is possible to leave late by car, to miss connections, to travel in a relatively time-less fashion. People find pleasure in travelling when they want to, along routes that they choose, finding new places unexpectedly, stopping for relatively open-ended periods of time, and moving on when they desire (see Sheller and Urry 2000). Cars are what Shove terms a 'convenience device' of contemporary society, a device that makes complex, harried 'just-in-time' patterns of social life possible, but only for those families owning, or with access to cars through renting, hiring taxis, accessing lifts from friends/family (1998).

### Mobility and the Good Life

I turn now to some ethical issues involved in congestion and travel. Congestion is not necessarily a 'bad'. It stems from how very large numbers of people desire and need to be proximate with each other at very particular moments of time and hence to travel at certain rush hours to certain rush places. Indeed some congestion may be deemed tolerable (especially at one-in-lifetime events) since atmosphere and ambience make it inevitable that there is considerable congestion at certain special moments. There would have to be congestion in order that there is such mass co-presence at that time. Such congestion can indicate high levels of social capital within a particular urban environment. And reducing congestion through dissuading people from travelling might reduce social capital (see Putnam 2000). Alternatively it can be argued that social life is actually far less rich because car-based transportation and especially high levels of commuting appear to lower the levels of social capital in an area (see Putnam 2000, on the US). In the latter case any systems to reduce congestion would be a good. One implication is that it is necessary to distinguish between good and bad congestion.

Further, it is necessary to distinguish between actual and perceived 'congestion'. The latter is probably much more important in affecting the willingness of the 'public' to accept forms of charging or levy upon their use of the car. But this allows for the possibility that actual congestion could be lower in some places than others and yet no pressure builds up socially and politically to deal with

such congestion.

Third, it also seems that with the low level of trust enjoyed by public bodies it is going to be very hard to induce people to change their behaviour by using their car less (Macnaghten and Urry 1998: chaps 2 and 3; Vigar 2002: 196-7). Information and advice from the 'centre' will not be believed, especially when government ministers or local dignitaries are notoriously heavy users of car-based transport. Also while new road building is a fairly straightforward policy, it may be hard for many to understand what is good and desirable about the policy of demand reduction especially at a time when bus transport is declining and rail transport is in chaos (see Vigar 2002: 197). Demand reduction techniques may look like yet another unfair and discriminating imposition by relatively illegitimate public bodies. But also some objections to congestion will be developed by those with products to sell, especially those smart products that can enable cars or their passengers to be monitored and hence charged. A technological fix is likely to issue from those companies that would sell expensive and possibly ineffective smart products to public bodies.

Moreover, if all other things were equal, then we could imagine that a 'good society' would not limit, prohibit or re-direct the desire for such co-presence and hence congestion. The good society would seek to extend the possibilities of co-presence to every social group and regard infringements of this as involving undesirable social exclusion. This is partly because co-presence is desirable in its own right. But also, according to Putnam's research, there are other desirable consequences. It is 'good to talk' face-to-face since this minimises privatisation, expands highly desirable social capital and promotes economic activity, in mutually self-sustaining ways. A socially inclusive society would elaborate and extend the possibilities of co-presence to all members. Significant inequalities with regard to access to such co-presence constitute undesirable social exclusion. A good society would minimise 'coerced immobility' (as well as the many forms of 'coerced mobility') and maximise the conditions for co-presence.

However, of course this all depends upon the socio-spatial organisation of that society and of its linkages with other societies. And because of massive resource and environmental constraints, the right to corporeal travel to realise co-presence can never be unlimited. Co-presence always has other consequences. Thus co-presence cannot be realised without extensive limitation, especially related to the transportation infrastructure as well as to the more general socio-spatial ordering within different societies.

The following are then some of the crucial issues around mobility that this analysis of time and co-presence raises.

1. First, if there are limitations upon proximity how should it be decided that co-presence is more important for some social groups, for some geographical areas, or for some kinds of organisations, than for others?
2. Which socio-spatial inequalities with regard to co-presence can and should be eliminated over time and which cannot or should not? How should decisions be made about new investments that will enhance the physical co-presence of some groups rather than others (say of commuters, or air travellers, or car-drivers and so on)?
3. Is it possible to develop ways that differentially value different forms of movement for co-presence, such as family or work or education or pleasure or shopping and so on?
4. Should we be bothered if virtual proximity, such as banking on-line and missing out on the face-to-face conversations with bank staff, replaces such conversations? Does the example of 'imaginative travel' via the TV show that there will be less conversation and a weakening of social capital if more and more relationships are conducted on-line?

5. And how can we ensure that there is sufficient corporeal travel so that the pleasures of proximity do not disappear as more people appear to live Putnam's dystopia of privatised 'lives on the screen'?

Finally, I have talked about corporeal mobility without considering the various modes of travel. However, there are huge variations, not only in the functional saving of time or the covering of more space within the same period of time, but in the pleasures and pain involved in such different modes of travel. Travel is a 'performed art' involving anticipation and day-dreaming about the journey, the destination and who/what might be encountered on the way (Adler 1989). Different modes of travel involve very varied combinations of timing, pleasure, expectation, fear, kinaesthetics, convenience, boredom, slowness, comfort, speed, danger, risk, sociability, playfulness, health, surprise and so on.

1. Should travel to generate co-presence should be undertaken by all major social groups in the same fashion (such as on public transport)?

2. How much should there be equality in access to the same modes of mobility, knowing that access to different modes are socially divided by gender, age, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability and so on?

3. And how much is the choice of different modes of transport is itself dependent upon distinctions of social taste (as the late great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would have maintained)?

## References

- Adler, J. 1989. 'Travel as performed art', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 1366-91
- Axhausen, K. 2002. 'Social networks and travel behaviour', ESRC Mobile Network Workshop, Cambridge, February
- Boden, D. 2000. 'Worlds in action: information, instantaneity and global futures trading', in B. Adam, B., Beck, U., van Loon, J. (eds) *The Risk Society and Beyond*. London: Sage
- Boden, D. and Molotch, H. 1994. 'The compulsion to proximity', in R. Friedland and D. Boden (eds) *Now/Here. Time, Space and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Evans, P. and Wurster, T. 2000. *Blown to Bits. How the new economics of information transforms strategy*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- Graham, S. and Marvin, S. 2001. *Splintering Urbanism*. London: Routledge
- Macnaghten, P. and Urry, J. 1998. *Contested Natures*. London: Sage
- Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster
- Rifkin, J. 2000. *The Age of Access*. London: Penguin
- Scharff, V. 1991. *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*. New York: Free Press
- Sheller, M. and J. Urry 2000. 'The city and the car', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24: 737-57
- Shove, E. 1998. *Consuming Automobility*. SceneSusTech Discussion Paper. Dublin: Sociology Dept
- Urry, J. 2002. 'Mobility and proximity', *Sociology* (forthcoming)
- Vigar, G. 2002. *The Politics of Mobility*. London: Spon

1 I am grateful to my colleagues on the CHIME project, Elizabeth Shove and Noel Cass for their comments on various related papers.