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On the run? Growing up in modern mobile societies. John Urry interviewt von Claus J. Tully

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On the run?

Claus J. Tully

Growing up in modern mobile societies
John Urry interviewt von Claus J. Tully

Das hier veröffentlichte Interview wurde am Rande des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie am 7. Oktober 2004 in München geführt. Thema des Gesprächs ist die Ausformung sozialer Bezüge unter dem Eindruck einer modernen, netzwerkmäßig organisierten mobilen und kommunikativen Gesellschaft. Im Interview wird der Frage nachgegangen, wie sich das Aufwachsen von Kindern und Jugendlichen im Kontext von Familie und lokalen Bezügen unter diesen Bedingungen verändert. In seinen Büchern »The Tourist Gaze« von 1990 und »Consuming Places« (1995) thematisiert John Urry die gewandelte Bedeutung von Orten. 1994 expliziert er gemeinsam mit Lash in »Economies of Signs and Space« die These der generellen Mobilisierung von Symbolen und der Menschen, die der mobilen Ökonomie dienen. In »Sociology beyond Societies« (1999) argumentiert John Urry im Sinne der Castellschen Netzgesellschaften, dass wir soziales Leben nicht länger mit den vertrauten und letztlich statischen Kategorien beschreiben können. Auch in seinem jüngsten Buch »Global Complexity« (2003) plädiert er für eine neue Sichtweise auf Nationen, Orte, Regionen im Dienste sozialwissenschaftlicher Begriffsbildung vor dem Hintergrund globaler Verschränkung.

John, you have published quite a lot about mobility. In your book »Sociology beyond Society« and in »Theory, Culture and Society« you argue that we need new metaphors and concepts to describe mobility. Therefore my first question: what does mobility mean in your perspective?

Okay. I think there are two different sets of things here. First, there is the changing nature of movement: the movement of people, the movement of ideas, of information, images. There are the ways in which those movements intersect with each other and the way those intersections of those different kinds of movements form and reform patterns of social life, of youth, of family, of work, of relation. Second, I see the study of mobility as the study of all of those things. And to do so therefore introduces a kind of new way of doing the social sciences which is not just empirically different but in the way it puts on the agenda and asks questions and indeed entails new methods that would break with more static, more structural, more bounded notions of what is social science.

If you deal with mobility in a socioscientific perspective, you have to take into account

the changed form of mobility and movement. What do these new aspects mean in regard to young people, to the process of growing up? What consequences does this have for children and families?

Well, I think it would bring out all kinds of patterns of social life, both historically, but especially in the contemporary period. There is a whole set of changes and transformations of those connections and relationships. I wouldn't want to say that family life has ever been static. That would be ridiculous, all those historic micropatterns of migration. But certainly something about contemporary patterns of movement has produced new senses of fluid relationships, relationships which are probably more transient, more on the move, more conducted while out and about, and involving the multiple use of different kinds of movement of people, images, information and so on. Thus with regard to the family. One would therefore think of the family as being now more dispersed, some people have described this as a networked family, the networking of family life. Actually worldwide: the phenomenon of the declining size of households, that family members are therefore more distributed. And this is of course true for many families in developing as well as in first world societies. So there is more a sort of networked pattern. But of course people come together from time to time.

We always think of family as something solid, as an arrangement between people with a concrete location. What does mobility mean for the family as a category when everything dissolves into »fluid relationships«? What is a family network? Can we still think of the family as an institution in the traditional sense?

Well, I think we have families, but they are more complex, they are more spread out, they are more networked, they come together more for specific occasions. There was a very interesting study in the UK about what people think are the crucial things they needed to travel for. And most of the things they referred to were family events, weddings, christenings, funerals, Christmases, birthdays and so on. These are all sorts of obligations to re-meet. So even if the family is spread out, there are many negotiations about meeting up. Because when one does meet, who counts as the family members? There is more choice. A lot of studies have shown this, there are a lot of choices involved in families. You know, which relatives or stepparents, stepsons, stepdaughters, whatever. There is a kind of sets of choices and negotiations, but nevertheless strong obligations for – what I call – co-presence on some occasions at some times, often in very specific places. You know, the family home or the place where the family went on holiday or the summer house. I guess some Germans have kind of summer houses by the lake.

These are all examples for the phenomenon of »living apart together«. People don't spend their everyday life together, they live at a distance from each other and

try to keep in touch. At first sight this form of social life doesn't appear very attractive, or what do you think?

I am not really making ethical pronouncements. I'm saying that the trends are moving in that direction, across the world, not just in the first world. And there is a whole series of things which feed into that: obviously the massively declining costs of travel, international travel, the declining costs of international phone calls, the hugely declining cost of the mobile phone and obviously the emerging technology within that. The tendency for the internationalising of students for example, across the world. And having once been a student and having got used to living somewhere else and then forming networks with people elsewhere, people that don't return to where they are relatively bounded, what Barry Wellman calls »little boxes«.

I think this is a crucial point: once you are aware that you can learn to live in other parts of the world, then you are also willing to do it.

And also you form networks, connections. And to a degree you keep up with those networks. And for a lot of people, maybe a couple of billion people, you've got those networks and you don't totally lose them. And this produces some obligation to keep up with people and to see them from time to time. You don't see them all the time, you see them from time to time, this sort of intermittent travel. You have a sort of presence in people's lives although you don't see them all time. You know if there aren't ten 9/11s or something, or something dramatic happens to the cost of air fuel or the telecommunication system, I don't believe people will sort of retreat back, away from that. They've got used to it, and have got used to the array of

connections and therefore to this much more networked life, in which the family itself is part of the networking.

In regard to travelling students it seems to me that only a minority of students take part in programs like ERASMUS, maybe 10 or 20%. And a larger part of these travellers take experiences like these only as an episode, as a phase in one's life. And they don't necessarily keep up these worldwide connections. I have rather the impression that there is a polarisation. On the one hand you have this new elite of young, well-educated people that are really citizens of the world. On the other hand you have a big proportion of people who stick to their hometowns and work where their parents used to work, maybe even in the same firm. What do you think about this observation?

Actually studying the effects of large amounts of international travel by students – I don't think anybody's done that research. Partly because it is a relatively contemporary phenomenon. British universities are overwhelmed with Chinese students at the moment, probably hundreds of thousands of Chinese students. Of course in ratio to the total population of China it's tiny. On the other hand it is an extraordinary phenomenon, some courses are 80 % Chinese. And often people will stay in the UK for at least for one year, they are doing a Master's Course, they stay in the UK a bit and get British friends, not on a huge scale, but a bit. And they will come back from time to time. So I'm not saying that this is true for everybody. I'm saying it's true for significantly increasing numbers of people. And the scale is upwards. I'm not saying this is true for everybody so far. But all the trends are towards very substantial amounts of expansion. Especially because all societies around the world are massively increasing their numbers of students, just to take young people, students, I mean, at least 50 % percent are going through some kind of higher education. Well, this is half of that generation.

Today mobility plays an important role in the process of growing up. Here in Germany we have a well-established youth sociology, but in regard to youth and mobility there is a need for more research. Why is this type of research relevant in your perspective?

As I was reading in your excellent article you bring out the interconnections of young people's lives with a whole array of different technologies, many of which but not all – many of which in some sense remove people or separate young people from strict location within the home, within the family home. They in some ways take people out of the home through getting a driving licence, which in Germany more or less all young people around 18, 19 acquire. Even though you've got a good public transport system, that is kind of a paradox. Obviously the huge ownership of mobile phones in more or less every relatively prosperous country and a lot of non-prosperous countries where mobile phones have jumped above other technologies. Obviously other things like Walkman, iPods and the moving around of music and so on. And I think all of those bring out that young people's lives are experienced and organized in part on the move, in part to create a sort of parallel universe to the family home. Even if they are in the home they are partly outside. And I think most mobile phonecalls are actually made in the home, aren't they, paradoxically. But of course they are to make these connections and of course to make arrangements and rearrangements out of the home.

A colleague of mine has this nice phrase. He talks about the importance of »interspace«, the kind of spaces in between school, family home, leisure place, you're moving in between these and mostly as you're moving you're in touch through the mobile telephony. And I think the increasing in scale of this interspace becomes important for young people's lives, good or bad. And the changing natures of mobilities are central to young people's lives. It is not a kind of incidental thing. And it is a kind of a shift, I suppose, from more functional sorts of travel, when people travel to school or travel on holiday with their family. There is more mobile indeterminate interspace or interspatiality.

What are the typical lines of research or studies regarding youth and mobility in Great Britain? Is any research done into growing up with new technologies?

Yes, this colleague I worked with, called Michael Hulme, most of his research is actually for the private sector. There is also research done at the University of Surrey by Nina Wakeford, in a center called INCITE, which again is being funded by big telephone companies. There is also Christian Liccoppe in Paris, he worked for France Telecom. So I think there is an array of young people's mobile lives being researched. Although it is actually an interesting problem to research people and activities and experiences which are in part on the move. And that goes back to the mobility

paradigm in the need for methods of research which in some ways capture, represent and simulate this kind of movements.

You already mentioned the necessity of a new approach to mobility research because of the changed human and social movements. Could you please specify the research methods that you are thinking of?

I think the interview is the main social science technique. And you generally interview people before or after they have done something. You ask them about what they did and what their attitudes or values or whatever were to that event. And that is true whether it is qualitative or quantitative research, but the interview is central. That seems to be quite tricky when people, but also information and communications, are flowing around. And of course you can do some interviews for example while travelling with people. So I've had people doing research on buses, interviewing the passengers, interviewing the bus driver when he stopped. Basically a kind of interviewing while on the move. A longstanding problem in tourism research I have been very interested in is how you research people during those moments of pleasure and enjoyment and so on. You know you can observe them. So my general point is the methods we have to use. We certainly need to move beyond this kind of rather place-based method of interviewing. And in some ways the interviews and other methods need to capture this more extensively.

And I suppose also there are these new technologies which of course do record and trace where people have been, trace their phone calls, their internet use and so forth. So to some degree one might be able to use some of those technologies themselves, plus of course visual technologies and so on. There is another colleague of mine doing this project on travel time use. Amongst other things she is using a very small digital camera to walk up and down trains recording what people are doing. She is interested very much into the material culture, into the physicality, into the objects, without getting people's heads, so it is done anonymously.

... and what killer applications there will be in 10 or 20 years, who knows.

So I think the use of new technology here causes a big advantage because some of these new technologies are part of this new mobile life, the camera in the phone. So these are some methodological suggestions.

Does mobility only mean a specific form of communication? And to what extent is this kind of mobility and communication modified by the use of new technologies?

Yes. Well it is definitely changed by new interdependent technologies. I see it the other way round, I see all sorts of movements including the movements of communications as part of this more general pattern of mobility. So mobility is the more general category within which there are all sorts of specific kinds of movements, the movement of people, of bits of communication, of images, of information, and indeed, of course, of risks and other things.

Are the ICTs (Information, Communication, Technologies) in your view more a kind of substitute or acceleration of mobility? And what is your opinion about this kind of interaction between communication technology and mobility?

I think that is almost the 64,000 dollar question. I think it is extremely hard to know how that is going to develop in 20 or 30 years. Because the internet is a decade or so old, mobile telephony is a decade or so old, so we're at the most incredibly early stages of those two technologies. I guess these are the two most powerful. And of course we also don't know how they are

going to intersect and converge with each other. They are converging at the moment, but how they will converge and what – we've got this phrase – killer applications there will be in 10 or 20 years, who knows. Actually if we did know, we wouldn't be here, we would be making 64,000 dollars. So all we can do is to make some sorts of guesses. So far all evidence seems to suggest that more communications, more information flows, more flows of images through various sorts of technologies seem to enhance the rate at which people also physically travel. There may be some specific reductions because people may from time to time not travel, they might travel less frequently, in specific moments, for example all the debate around 9/11, when people said we're going to start video conference systems and things like that.

Regarding the idea of »fluid relations« and »liquid modernity« one can say that the spaces in which we move expand. But the kind of movement is highly dependent on the particular stage in one's life. Young people have other reasons for travelling than businessmen. What do you think?

I think this is an interesting question as to whether certain practices which get established, laid down – such as the path-dependency of young people. There is intense sociability, meeting-up-ness and the technologies are enhancing that, adding to that. And of course adding to the capacity to make arrangements on the go, while in this interspace, you no longer need to make the arrangement to meet at eight o'clock so and so, have it in your diary, you just start and the mobile phone's going on route, and I suppose part of the fun of the event is the actual making and rearranging and the debating in which bar you're going to meet up and so forth. But if that happens there, then it is extremely hard to imagine people stopping these patterns.

This is the first generation that has been familiar with these two technologies. I think this is very interesting. I have given lectures at Lancaster about the social significance of the internet. And the students were completely blank because this is just what they are used to. Why would you talk about it? It is like talking about the history of electricity, which of course is very interes-

**Do you know everybody
in your address book?
When do you stop
keeping somebody in
your address book?**

ting, but they don't know that either. They just don't see that this is interesting. And they of course can't believe that there was a world before computers and screens.

The whole way in which the physical environment of place has multiple screens, I think this is a very interesting feature of the urban landscape in general. And for young people this is what the urban landscape is like. So imagine you would stop that and also stop the use of those means of communication for regular meetings, I think it is the meetingness that is utterly crucial. And the stuff about increased movements and flows and so on talks in a rather two-dimensional sort of way. What it doesn't capture is the sort of intense significance of meeting up. The significance of face-to-face, of seeing other people's body language, the co-presence, café, bar, office environment, in a family, the family meeting. So however many phone calls people made, they were not there, they were only there if they were physically co-present. And young people are the first generation who really have this big advantage we have given them of internetisation and mobile telephony.

Young people are preparing their get-togethers with modern communication technology, which brings them closer together, but does not necessarily expand their relation to space. They are all getting used to the internet and the mobile phone, but their real life hasn't changed all that much. Their world is still structured by school. What has altered is the possibility to get in touch with people in different countries or even to get into virtual realities. Everyday life is not the same, but has remained quite similar. Young people are still going to school, they meet friends, go to the discotheque ...

I don't strongly disagree with that. Although you are talking I suppose about people up to sixteen or so. Again this UK research shows the use of the mobile phone, often making connections with people who are two houses away. But of course we also do that with email, contact somebody in the neighbouring office. So I totally agree that that can be a highly localised use of these technologies. I take two things though. One is that it creates this parallel sort of universe of young people, of course they always have done a bit of that, they hung out on the street corner, next to the house, slightly away from the parents. But this provides a much more extensive way of

communicating and connecting with quite substantial numbers of other people. So though they may be all quite local, it is a parallel universe.

Second: the movement around university or studying introduces youngish people to an array of people from different places – I suppose I'm talking about things in the UK, but this internationalising of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon, obviously very uneven and does set up connections with other people from other places. And those are likely to persist, and then form further connections, because of course if you know somebody from so and so then you know some of their friends and so on. So you build up all sorts of networked patterns of sociability. That is another project we're about to start on social networks and future mobilities of people in their twenties basically, people going in to their first professional job. And it is actually difficult to research, but how to research their networks, are they national or international, how often do they need to meet up with people who are part of their networks?

What approach to this problem do you propose?

So we don't know quite how we are going to do it yet. I'm doing it with Kay Axhausen who works in Zürich and does lots of network analyses and is interested in new methods of doing research. It is based in the UK, funded by the UK government. We have to do a lot of long interviews. But we are interested in this question: Why did you need to meet up? How did you make the arrangements? How do you remember what happened? How often do you have to meet up? How often do you have to meet up to call somebody a friend? Such kinds of interesting questions. And how many friends do you have? What is a friend? Kay Axhausen argues that people know more people than they once did, they know more people because of this internet and address books. Do you know everybody in your address book? When do you stop keeping somebody in your address book? I am always amused – this is not really relevant – when somebody moves university or moves home or something and you get this huge list of people they send their new address. Well, I don't really know this person, why am I interested? But of course that is interesting: what is it to know somebody then?

In your article about »Risks and Mobilities« from 2004 you talk about the hole in the ozone layer, AIDS and similar problems. Why didn't you also mention consequences of globalisation like the modification of clothes, food, music, movies and so on? Specific aspects of our lives are changing today, do you see risks here?

I have written about that somewhere else. I'm always keen to emphasize whether there are gains. I don't know whether the world has gained from 30,000 McDonald's. Although I do actually remember when McDonalds was the latest thing, the latest fashion in the UK, in the early seventies I suppose, and this was the place to eat. So we shouldn't immediately assume that this is all simply negative. But in general I would see these things as both costs and benefits, risks and new kinds of pleasures. I agree that there are risks of cultural homogenisation.

John, I have two more questions for you. We have already mentioned the »richness of artefacts« – today we need certain artefacts and technologies to interact. To what extent does this influence the human mind and body? How does the use of technologies like

I think one of the really big physical changes that made a huge difference to western societies was the invention of the stirrup to ride with on horses.

mobile phone or internet affect our feeling and our social life? Today without some new gadgets and technologies we are not able to communicate, or only to a limited extent.

I agree. And actually of course the history of mobility has been the history of various bits of technology which have extended human powers in different sorts of ways. I think one of the really big physical changes that made a huge difference to western societies was the invention of the stirrup to ride with on horses. You had the stirrup where you put your feet in, and then the horse and the rider became an incredibly powerful fighting machine, which previously wasn't the case because people just fell off the horses when they tried to fight. But with the stirrup it absolutely transformed the rider and the horse into this powerful fighting machine, which for a millennium was the most important invention and it was mobile, a mobile fighting machine through the little technology, this little invention.

So small objects can turn simple things into incredibly powerful moving machines, the moving machine of the horse and rider. So it was the horse-rider as this combined thing, combined through the stirrup. So thinking about certain things like the kind of technology of the boot, the walking boot made leisure-walking possible. And partly because of the boot places like the Alps became a place to be walked in for leisure. And in a sense there has been a transformation of the Alps into a place of leisure, for walking and then subsequently for climbing. So I think there are really many interesting and significant objects of that sort that transform human actions. We should actually get away from what Latour calls »the purified social realm«, the purified human realm. And humans are almost always combined with something physical, for example clothing, different kinds of clothing that produce different sorts of efforts and expenses in relationship to varied environments. The sociology of mobility can't really be done without this variety of objects. And I suppose the last decade or so has hugely added to that realm of objects which enable people to be on the move but to keep in touch. Sometimes of course the object you need is only a piece of information like numbers, telephone numbers or your email address system. So there is this student who has just done a PhD in Lancaster on round-the-world travellers which is interesting, young people travelling around the world and how they organize that partly through sorts of tech-

nologies. And at first she assumed that round-the-world travellers would all be carrying laptop computers with them. In fact they were when she first started studying it, maybe five years ago. So they were round-the-world travellers but with a very nice laptop in their huge rucksacks. Now she has discovered that they no longer need their laptop, all they need are internet cafés, computers are everywhere. All you now need is a hotmail account and just a few little numbers. She is also interested in round-the-world websites, as the people move around they construct these websites to get people to comment on where people are going, where they go next. So all of that can be done actually without much equipment. But what they are doing is partly leaving bits of themselves as traces in cyberspace. So I think that is an interesting further switch and shift.

I've noticed now when I come abroad I don't bother with carrying a laptop about. I've got my little memory stick. That is an interesting little thing. You know I have got all the stuff I have written in the last 15 years on one computer, and I have just downloaded it onto my memory stick, that's almost my life's work on this little thing. I looked at it and thought it can't really all be there, including quite big files and visual stuff, quite big files but it sits on this little thing. So I suppose the miniaturization described by Makimoto and Manners in their book »Digital Nomads«, written about seven years ago, is a quite interesting idea. They don't predict those memory sticks, but that would have been a much better example of that. And because of the miniaturization you find yourself carrying somewhat more. There is somebody else in Lancaster, she wants to do a project on the importance of luggage in travel. Ryan Air is trying to stop having luggage in the hold to speed up their flights. You would just have hand luggage on Ryan Air flights to speed up the turn-around time at the airport.

One last question, John: We live in a highly differentiated world, we are mobile and have the possibilities and technologies to communicate. The differences between urban and rural areas and between the sexes may decrease. Does this mean the equality and homogenisation of social conditions? But when we look at young people and the huge importance of communication and the need to have enough money for mobile phone, internet, music and so on, new inequalities seem to

appear, in the traditional categories sex, urban/rural, and so on. What do you think?

I totally agree that like all technologies – and here we have a sort of burst of new interdependent technologies coming to the fore at the same time – that of course this always produces new inequalities. But of course any new technology produced new inequalities. The history of the railway, the history of car-travel obviously set up huge inequalities, probably more pronounced than some of the inequalities now. Partly because of the rapid uses and the rate at which the current technologies have been taken up, and the reduced cost of some of them. So I think SMS messaging must be the technology which has become cheaper more rapidly and more widespread around the world. I don't know the numbers. I think there are about a billion phones worldwide, and there certainly about a billion internet users. And of course in a way to use the internet you don't need a computer, this is really interesting. And the huge number of internet cafés in China and in India and other Asian countries is a very interesting phenomenon.

You can socialize the provision, you don't have to have the relatively expensive lump of computer technology to access. But there is no doubt that there are some new inequalities generated. And we might say there is a new »mobility elite«. So there is more inequality for those who don't have access. So in a sense it makes the inequality more pronounced by virtue of what I and others have called »mobility capital«. That makes those people without access to the mobility capital even more lacking access. I totally agree about that. There are many interesting studies on relatively immobilized people. In the UK there is a town, the town that is said to be the most interneted with the highest ratio of people on the internet and with their own webpages, it has the highest rate of mobile phone use and so on. It is not London or Oxford or Cambridge or whatever, it is called Alston. It is in the middle of the Pennine Mountains quite near where I live. It is a place out of the way. And they simply have made themselves interneted. It is really interesting. It is a town of a few thousand people, predominantly rural, most of the people connected with agriculture. But they made themselves this distinct place, it is now well known in England. So you get these nice paradoxes. And it has high levels of participation, the people have a lot of broadband based discussion groups for political issues, civic

issues, and they also meet up a lot as well. So it is an interesting paradox. But all technologies produce inequalities.

The car was the most incredible inequality when it was introduced as a speed-machine for rich young men in Germany and the US and in England before the First World War. It was a speed-machine for rich young men. And it became democratized obviously partly through the VW Beetle, through the Model-T Ford and so forth. But actually that took some decades to happen.

So the desire for differentiation is also a trigger for the development of new technologies?

That's right. But I mean a billion users of the internet out of a six and a third billion people in the world is pretty amazing. In Lancaster we have all these Chinese students. And the Chinese students have the best computer skills. Every Chinese student in this system has been taught basic things about Microsoft software actually, you know, whenever you're doing your Powerpoint, if it doesn't work it is always the Chinese students who sort it out. They may not have good language skills, but their knowledge of Microsoft software is perfect. This is again a nice paradox. And they are the people who keep, in terms of email, connections back to China, keeping in touch with their family. They actually take up a lot of space in the computer labs because they are always connecting with family and friends in China and in the rest of the world, they talk about where their classmates are, and they are all around the world, well, in the US and UK.

John, thanks for the interview. _____

John Urry is Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University, and is one of the best-known sociologists doing research and writing about mobility as a sociological category. He is also Co-Director of CeMoRe (Centre for Mobilities Research) where research is done on technological, social and cultural developments in mobile communications, information storage and retrieval.

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