The threat hanging over our global travel

By
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We are travelling more than ever before, but 95% of transportation depends on oil, for which global supplies have already peaked. What will happen to our mobile lives in the future, asks Professor John Urry

In this talk I want to consider how it is that mobility is changing patterns of relationships around the world and there are many features of new systems that are becoming extensive, important, affecting people's lives. There's the extensive growth of car-based travel, and it's thought that there are getting on for a billion cars and trucks around the world, and some people calculate that this will go up within some decades to 2 billion. There is indeed a book with that title: Two Billion Cars.

At the same time there has been an extensive growth of air travel, so that there are getting on for a billion legal air arrivals each year. Overall, travel and tourism is the world's largest industry, and involves not only the travel but also the building of hotel rooms and of conference centers, apartments, and so on.

Travel to visit our 'important others'

It's thought that this scale of movement, and then providing hospitality for those on the move, accounts for about a third of carbon-dioxide emissions. This comes about not just because more people want to go on holiday but because of the ways in which people's "important others" in their lives are spread out and distributed spatially. So as societies are more spread out, people's friends, their family members, their colleagues, their business associates and so on are also spread out. People are less likely to bump into their friends and family. What this produces are more visits, more scheduling of visits, more places to meet up when those visits take place, so there's a kind of dispersion of people, activities, groups, networks and meetings.

This means that if we think of people as having a social network, members of this social network are spread out, and meeting up with those members of one's network is something that requires work. To network is to work – it's a kind of accomplishment. So this pattern of extensive travel results from the ways in which people's significant others are more widely distributed, and they are distributed in terms of one's friendships, one's family members, one's colleagues, one's business associates and so on. They are more distributed, and so in order to have those relationships with one's family, one's friends, one's business associates, one's profession, and so on, that requires more meeting, and it requires more travel to undertake and to facilitate those meetings.

If we think of people having a social network, the social network that each person has is both distinct to them but also, geographically, widely distributed. Thus in order to make and to activate that network,

that's something that requires accomplishment, it requires working at. It involves a weaving together of physical travel, communications, other pieces of information, knowledge of where the meeting might take place, and so on.

Social networks rely on friendship miles

So as people meet face to face – and they still do seem to meet face to face on an astonishing scale – this involves often longer distance travel, more planning, and more coordination. This results not only in food miles, with which we have become familiar, but also of what we can call friendship miles, family miles and colleague miles. So in order to participate as a member of a social network requires achieving these miles.

The sort of commitments we have to each other – to our friends and family – are thus crucial to people's social networks, but also crucial to the kinds of travel and communications that they engage in. so they form, they need to re-form. I sometimes use the phrase "network activation".

In general, research also suggests that the greater the distance between people, if other things are equal, then the more time people would then spend with each other, the longer the meetings will last.

So there are very extensive social networks and what this does is to account for the development of many and diverse forms of physical travel in the contemporary world. We're familiar, for example, with business and professional travel, and indeed much of the advertising of train companies and for airlines tends to focus upon that particular kind of travel. But there are many other forms, and I'm going to just mention a few of those.

Diversity of Global Travels

One of those is the travel of younger people, sometimes called discovery travel, of students, au pairs, other young people, sometimes described as going on their "OE" – their overseas experience. This often involves quite indeterminate periods of staying in one or more other countries, often forming and re-forming new social networks on the go.

There is also a significant amount of medical travel, and it's actually interesting that a lot of the early history of what we call tourism was actually medical tourism, visiting spa towns across Europe.

There is also a significant amount of religious travel – pilgrimage – and in fact some of the largest forms of collective mass movement are not to Olympic Games or secular festivals of that sort but to religious festivals and to places of religious worship. Travelling to Mecca is the most obvious example of that.

Also we might note the extensive forms of post-employment travel: people who are retired or semi-retired, who often of course not only travel but also acquire property in another country, and then that sets up continued interconnections between the country in which they have their new home and their friends and family in the country they came from. That has been, up until relatively recently, a major form of newish kind of travel, particularly from northern Europe to southern Europe, and was part of the huge property boom in Greece and Spain.

There's also what we might describe as kind of trailing travel, where certain people travel and others trail after them – I suppose, classically, the male diplomatic with the trailing travel of his female spouse, who then has to provide appropriate services of entertainment and hospitality in the place where the person is the ambassador, and so on.

There's also a lot of travel within a diaspora, so for example in the Chinese diaspora – Chinese people living out of China – which is said to be estimated at 25-45 million people, a huge society in which

there are very extensive forms of travel within that diaspora. And of course that also produces many Chinatowns, which in turn generate various kinds of tourist travel and so on.

Visiting friends and relatives is what is thought to be the fastest growing category of travel in the contemporary world, so not simple tourist travel, not business travel but visiting friends and visiting family.

Then we should also note that there is a lot of travel that is enforced in various kinds of ways. There's asylum seeking, there's refugee travel, there's the travel of people who are slaves, and it's calculated by one writer that there are more slaves in the contemporary world than there were at the height of the European slave trade in the early years of the 19th century.

All travel depends on oil

So there are many diverse patterns here, but all of them, curiously, depend upon one thing: fast powerful machines that move people. And almost all those machines presuppose one particular fuel, namely oil (railways are the one partial exception to that). Oil provides over 95% of transportation energy in the modern world, and so all of these forms of networking, of friendship and family and so on, presuppose oil. Oil also fuels almost all the world's ships, and in particular the container ships full of goods being increasingly transported from China to the rest of the world. There are now container ships that can take up to 11,000 containers, an astonishing kind of moving exhibition in the sea.

Oil is also an element in almost all manufactured goods, and almost all forms of food production presuppose oil for fertilizers, for irrigation and for moving through the food miles. So these very diverse forms of travel are united by one characteristic: that they depend upon powerful mobile machines. And almost all these mobile machines run on one particular resource, namely oil. So there's an astonishing degree of oil dependence that has been set up here.

A fantastic problem of oil descent

Oil is also extraordinarily important at moments of crisis. It provides back-up power when, for example, nuclear power stations break down. But to be so dependent upon oil is a fantastic problem because of what is often described at the problem of oil descent. The United States, which initiated many of the oil-based patterns of mobility actually peaked in its oil supply in 1970. It now imports 75% of its oil. China's oil supplies have just peaked. The global peaking of oil per person throughout the world occurred in 1999. Many commentators are now suggesting that we have peaked globally in terms of oil supply and are running out. The chief economist of HSBC bank says there could be as little as 49 years left. The CEO of Royal Dutch Shell: "My view is that easy oil has probably passed its peak," he says. And the chief economist of the International Energy Authority, FatihBirol, an interesting and significant commentator, says that crude oil production probably peaked around 2006.

It's thought that there are probably 2 trillion barrels of conventional oil and about half of that supply has now been used up.

I think one of the most striking things is to think about the relationship between supply and use, so that it seems that for every four barrels of oil now consumed, only one new one is discovered. Some commentators think that that ratio will soon go to 10 used for only one being discovered. And indeed, what is really interesting, when were the largest oilfields discovered? Over 50 years ago, during the 1960s. Where, we might ask, will this leave mobile lives in the future?

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
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John Urry

Sociologue

British sociologist John Urry (1946-2016) was Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University. He was co-founder and director of the Centre for Mobilities Research from 2004 to 2015 and, in 2015, he co-founded the Institute for Social Futures. He wrote seminal mobilities texts such as Sociology Beyond Societies and Mobilities.

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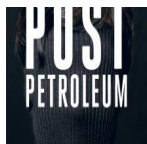
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