



Mobile Mutations

Sadie Plant and Chris Land

abstract

Between May 2002 and March 2003, Chris Land conducted an email conversation with Sadie Plant, in which they discussed topics ranging from life and work outside the institutions of academia to the future of the human species. Along the way, this virtual conversation ranges across neuro-pharmacology, the Situationiste Internationale, mobile telephony and the characterisation of the current global situation by a paradoxical conjunction of increasing mobility and tightly policed immobility. Through a series of engagements the general question is posed as to whether mobility itself is an increasingly fundamental arena for the contemporary exercise of power and what this conception of mobility might mean in an age of pervasive information technologies. Where mobility and communication are increasingly intertwined both issues need to be increasingly interrogated in relation to the transformations or mutations that they perform.

Chris Land: Your research covers a wide range of topics, from the relationships between the Situationiste Internationale and postmodernism, gender and IT, drugs, writing and international political economy, and more recently, the mobile phone and patterns of social behaviour. Do you see a particular thread of concerns linking these varied research agendas, and where do you see this developing? What are you currently working on?

Sadie Plant: These various themes may appear to have little in common, but they are all closely entangled in my mind! In some ways all my work involves digging just below the surface of orthodox histories and ideas and seeking out their neglected elements and influences – the impact of the situationists on so much subsequent philosophy, for example, or the extent to which psychoactive substances have intervened in a culture which would rather not acknowledge them. Even mobile phones, amazingly enough, have received very little intellectual attention, even though they are having a profound effect on parts of the world which have previously had little or no access to telecommunications of any kind. I am especially interested in technological changes, and the differences they can make not only to the ways in which people live and behave, but also to the ways in which we think and perceive ourselves. And while *Zeros and Ones* deals with technologies in the orthodox sense, I am also interested in a looser conception of technical processes – one that would, for example, include drugs as a kind of internal technology, changing the perceptual apparatus, just as digital technologies

change our outside world. I am also always keen to demonstrate something about, for want of a better phrase, the interconnectedness of things – I hope this comes out within each book as well as across all my work.

More generally, like many writers, I tend to write about the things I want to think through and explore myself – at the moment I'm working on some ideas around mobility, in relation to movements of people as well as those of goods, information, commodities. While I was researching the impact of the mobile phone last year, I began to think that its phenomenal popularity is due, in part, to a far more general rise in mobility of many kinds all across the world.

CL: I am intrigued by your idea of a 'general rise in mobility.' In what ways do you see this general mobility manifesting itself? It seems that we can hardly switch on the television or open a newspaper these days without seeing something about the illegal mobility of bodies across borders (most recently with asylum seekers for example), or the mass mobilisation of armies in the war against terrorism. These examples seem to be indicative of two sides of the same process. On the one hand an increasingly fluid mobility as borders are challenged and boundaries transgressed, but on the other hand a countermovement, where forces are mobilised to police these borders and protect the traditional order. I guess that my question relates to how you see these two movements as being interrelated, and whether you are suggesting that the increasingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable flows of commodities, capital, bodies and information is indicative of a general deterritorialization that is making architectural and geographically based power increasingly redundant?

SP: Many factors are contributing to the sense that we live in an increasingly mobile world, not least the spread of new and increasingly affordable technologies of travel and communication. Such developments make movement more possible, but they don't wipe out borders or the interests they protect.

I am both fascinated and disturbed by the enormous discrepancy that now exists between movements of people, which remain highly restricted in most cases, and those of goods, capital, and information, which tend to be promoted, at least in principle (even though none of these movements are really quite as free as the rhetoric of globalisation might lead us to believe). That there are demands for the free(er) movement of people is clear, not only when one sees hundreds of thousands of people risking their lives in search of better prospects everyday, but also when one looks at the demographic crises about to hit much of the Western world.

On the more abstract question of mobility, it seems there is more of it on all sides: terrorism and state attempts to counter it have become more mobile, just as markets and corporate attempts to channel them have both become more mobile too. In this sense, mobility is being used in support of established geopolitical interests: its rise may pose a significant challenge to geographical borders and power bases, but while the latter may be withering on some theoretical vine, they are still very much in practical place. Even so, I would say that there is a general deterritorialization underway; that territorialized interests are forced to react and respond to it; and that they do so with increasing

difficulty. But movements of people (and other movements too) clearly can be blocked and channelled in the short term, and the short term can last for a very long time.

CL: In *Writing on Drugs* you point to the centrality of anti-drug legislation in the formation of international law, and the economic interests invested in restricting the movement of certain drugs around the globe. On the other hand, however, you also note the centrality of the opium trade to the formation of a worldwide capitalist system. How do you see these two drives working themselves out, and how do they relate to the point you raised earlier concerning the effects of drug on the body of the human organism – “a kind of internal technology, changing the perceptual apparatus”?

SP: Drugs have indeed been historically important to the development of capitalism and international law: the opiates can be seen as vanguard commodities, establishing markets and trade routes on which other goods would later circulate, and legislation to control their production, distribution, and consumption was at the heart of the earliest international laws. But I would describe these two drives in different terms – the issue is not about capitalism on the one hand and laws and regulations on the other, but rather markets and their regulation as two sides of the same capitalist coin. Capitalism is not about free markets and unregulated trade, but rather the harnessing and control of would-be free markets by states, corporations and various other formations designed to take advantage and control of market activity which serves them only insofar as it does not exceed their interests. The history of the drugs trade is indeed a fascinating demonstration of the extremes to which these two sides of capitalism – free markets and state regulation – can go. The drugs trade represents the freest of markets, operating, as it does, quite outside the law, and distributing commodities which in many senses are an ideal kind of merchandise: as Burroughs said of heroin, it needs no advertising, guarantees that the customer comes back for more, and is therefore a model to which all other commodities aspire. At the same time, drugs also circulate on the most regulated and constrained of markets: no other trade or industry has ever been subject to such strong and all-encompassing laws. And for the last hundred years or so, each side of this dynamic has constantly excited the other to new extremes: the more rampant the trade, the more determined the interdictions, even to the point of declarations of a war on drugs which has, in turn, done more to stimulate than stem the trade.

It is almost as though the effects that psychoactive substances have on the individual body are reproduced at these larger scales: they stimulate, soothe, deceive, and hook both global capitalism and the individual user – and, indeed, many other kinds and scales of organic and non-organic systems. This is, perhaps, to be expected: it is the volatility, the active nature of these substances, that makes them – and attempts to control them – so effective, distinctive, and influential. It seems that they change the nature of all the systems – from the neurochemical to the macroeconomic – in which they intervene.

CL: The image that I get from the way you talk about drugs having parallel effects at different scales reminds me of some ideas from chaos and complexity theory. There is an almost fractal replication of specific patterns or effects at different scales, even if this is not precisely a repetition of the same. In 1998 you also seemed to suggest that there is a significant degree of systemic lock-in with drugs. Because of the interdependency of

the different scales upon which their effects manifest themselves, any move to liberalise drug controls at one level will inevitably have repercussions at manifold others so that legalisation would not only affect the bodies of the users and the wider culture, but would unsettle the balance of global political-economy. In light of this, how do you see current experiments and moves within parts of the UK to decriminalise and reclassify certain types of drug?

SP: Unfortunately, I think the current reclassifications are so minor that they have little bearing on the larger issues of the systemic functioning of psychoactive drugs. Although there are more significant moves afoot in other European countries – Portugal, for example, where all drugs have effectively been decriminalised – it seems to me that the broad dynamic would only change if there was a major, international shift in policy – a true end to the war on drugs, in other words. And the likelihood of this happening seems to me remote: as you say, it would indeed unsettle the geo-political balance, not least because some of the poorest countries at present – including Colombia, Burma, and Afghanistan – would suddenly find themselves sitting on a legitimate source of highly profitable income. Even more dramatically, an illegal trade that is now said to constitute some 10% of the global economy would be wiped out, and the implications of such a shift are almost impossible to compute. The current relaxations of the law are merely tinkering with a machinery which would need a concerted global change of heart to change, and – especially now that the US has, so to speak, other fish to fry – it seems unlikely that anything more significant will happen for some time. Having said all this, I do think that even subtle shifts in the legal situation tend to have equally subtle effects on individual users and drug cultures. I now spend a lot of time in Switzerland, where there is a slightly different policy in place, and this does seem to produce a different cultural atmosphere and rather more relaxed individual attitudes to the use of certain drugs as well.

CL: You mention Afghanistan here in relation to drugs, a linkage that is currently quite prominent in the news, but I find it interesting that you also recently used Afghanistan as an example of the emancipatory promise held out by new technologies like the mobile phone ('on the mobile', p. 75). In the same context, you also discuss the role of the mobile in 'mobilising' mass movement, such as anti-capitalist protest. Can this kind of technology really make a difference in such contexts, or is it more like the tinkering with drug laws?

SP: It is worth pointing out that the links between Afghanistan and the opium trade are not just prominent in the news – they are prominent in reality too, and have been for many years. In relation to your main question, however, there is a qualitative difference between the kind of tinkering one sees in terms of legislation and policy, and the small scale technological tinkering involved in the introduction of a basic technology such as the mobile phone. The extension of telecommunications to regions of the world and communities for which access to technology of any kind has been scant in the past is the kind of change that really does make a tangible, practical difference to people's everyday social and economic lives. It is not the result of policy decisions – indeed, the spread of such technologies is more likely to happen in spite of such moves rather than because of them. The availability of cheap mobile phones has, I am sure, done far more than any political attempts to extend access to telecoms to some of the poorest people in

the world. The introduction of a mobile phone may seem to make only a small difference to, for example, a rural community without telephone lines, but its actual impact can be profound. And I am convinced that it is with such small, local, material developments that the most effective and long-lasting changes are really made. Like the adoption of the mobile across the developing world, its use by increasingly mobile protesters is an example of the way in which technologies are so often used in unexpected ways and with unintended consequences. The mobile was for years promoted as a tool for jet-setting business travellers and executives of various kinds, but it has no shortage of other uses now.

By the way, you may feel that I mention Afghanistan too much – if I do, it is only because I feel I learnt so much while living in an Afghan community in Peshawar two years ago.

CL: I can certainly see how in the West the mobile has been taken up in some rather novel and quite unintended ways. Not only do we find ‘mobile monkey’ competition scams running overpriced call-charges, but we also see the possibility of new forms of organization, as witnessed both by managerial rhetoric about virtual organization and the new forms of resistance exemplified by anti-capitalist protest. On the other hand, the sheer uptake of mobile phones and related information technologies seems to point to a very specific production of desire. In effect, like the car, doesn’t the mobile point to the production of a kind of ‘automobile subject’? Someone who is characterised by a propensity toward self-direction and a belief in autonomy? It is almost as if the mobile plays out, and produces, a desire for a disembodied existence where movement approaches instantaneity as the speed of mobile communications accelerates connectivity and makes the body redundant?

Of course the paradox is that this automobility is always entirely social and material. The infrastructure supporting both the car and the mobile costs a huge amount of money to set up; diesel powered remote mobile masts for example, which need to be installed and regularly serviced. On top of this there is the labour involved in producing the machines themselves, often involving prolonged contact with physically dangerous chemicals and undertaken by poorly paid female workers in developing countries. How do you see these two sides of automobility fitting together; the material, embodied production of mobility on the one hand, and its apparently autonomous consumption on the other?

SP: First of all, I don’t accept that the mobile makes the body redundant, or has anything to do with a disembodied existence – it seems to me that one might just as well see the mobile as continuous with the individual body (I don’t want to use the McLuhanite language of extension, but I do think of the mobile in such material terms) – and indeed with the social body, as an additional network which doesn’t dematerialise, but instead connects. In individual terms, the mobile is probably the first piece of digital technology which directly and more or less constantly changes people’s intimate experience of their bodies, their senses of their capacities, the possibilities of the everyday, on the street, material self. And while it may seem that the mobile appeals to an increasing sense of autonomy and individuality in more social terms, I came across almost the opposite response in the course of my research on mobile use around

the world: in America, for example, people spoke of their reluctance to use mobiles precisely because they saw them compromising their personal space, invading their boundaries, violating their privacy, and actually diminishing their autonomy by, for example, putting them in a position of continual dependency on other people (always able to call for help, advice, etc.) By contrast, people in societies which I would characterise as rather more collective and interconnected – China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, for example – see the mobile in exactly the converse way: as a means of continuing already existing social networks; a way to extend a sense of social interconnectivity. I began to think that although there are some technical and economic reasons for the relatively slow take-up of the mobile in the US, what one might call the ‘automobility’ of American society underwrites a cultural reason for American reluctance to become integrated with mobile technologies. On the questions of production: yes, mobile masts cost money – and may have other costs as well – but they don’t cost anything like the kind of money one needs in order to install the infrastructure of fixed-line telephones. Low-paid female workers: yes, indeed. The light at the end of this particular tunnel is, however, that those low-paid female workers are both producers and consumers of this particular technology – and if not direct consumers, they are certainly likely to be beneficiaries of a technology which brings unprecedented access to telecommunications to even the most remote and, perhaps, surprising parts of the world. Indeed, it seems to me that the unintended consequences of mobile technology are far greater and far more positive in the developing world than in the west, where the mobile merely adds another telecoms technology to an already wide range of means of communication.

CL: I am curious both about your time in Afghanistan and also your decision to leave academic life to pursue a career as an independent researcher. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about what you were doing whilst in Afghanistan and how this relates to your current life as a researcher outside the university system. How do you fund your research and conferences, for example, and how has this effected the direction that your interests have taken?

SP: I wasn’t in Afghanistan itself, but in Peshawar, a city in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan which, at the time, was something of a capital in exile for about a million Afghan refugees. My time there had far more to do with personal connections than any clear intellectual trajectory, although it was a great opportunity for me to explore issues and ideas with which i would never have come into contact otherwise. I learnt a lot about Afghan culture, Islamic mysticism, Arabic and Persian literature, and countless unidentifiable themes which I suppose have now become integral to my own history and thinking – to shop in Afghan bazaars, to jump off moving buses without losing your veil, to live with the rules of sexual segregation, to sleep in temperatures above 40 degrees centigrade... Of course this is the kind of sojourn one can only make when working independently – even the most liberal academy might balk at funding an apparently fruitless life in a 2 room concrete house in a back alley of Peshawar! – so in that sense, my decision to leave the university has made an enormous difference to my life: it has made this and many other journeys and adventures possible, and it has enabled me to think without an agenda governed by departmental interests, academic consistency, theoretical lines and positions and so on. All this I value this extremely highly. On the other hand, the independent life can be very demanding – there are, for

example, both psychological and economic pressures from which one is relieved by a more institutional career. But I have always enjoyed working on my own, and I don't find it too difficult to make a living from writing, presentations, research, this and that... it is risky, of course, but I find it a far more satisfying way to live than when I'm in receipt of a salary.

CL: Whilst I recognise the limits that you are talking about in relation to systems of academic governance, even whilst working within the system, you seemed to be able to find some interesting spaces for transgression. I am thinking particularly of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at Warwick University, of which you were research director for a while, I believe. Could you perhaps talk a little bit about the ideas behind that project and what came out of it?

SP: You're right, I've always been extremely fortunate in finding interesting spaces within the academic system – even as a graduate student, I was moving between philosophy and several related disciplines, and to me these in-between areas are the most productive, albeit sometimes problematic, zones in which to work. The CCRU came together as a consequence of so many brilliant graduate students developing ideas which, although they were various and distinct, asked some common questions about the relationships between culture and technologies, both used in their widest senses. Many of them were interested in cybernetics, the work of philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, Irigaray, and Foucault, and the philosophical implications of various cultural tendencies in, for example, music and the arts. There was a feeling at the time that much of the existing work in this field had been looking through McLuhan's famous 'rear-view mirror', tending to overlook the more extreme and fascinating implications of technological change for social, economic, and political relations, and also for philosophy itself, and I suppose the immediate goals of the CCRU were to come at these issues with some fresh and original perspectives. As for what came out of it – well, certainly some wonderful discussions and research. Perhaps like many of the best projects, the CCRU was short-lived, but it certainly had its moment and made an impact at the time.

CL: Why was this project so short lived? Do you think it is difficult to maintain the momentum for this kind of research in academia, and how did this relate to your own career decisions after the CCRU?

SP: For me personally, I suppose it was difficult to maintain the momentum – but I'm sure it is possible: there are plenty of people who love the academic environment and are able to do some great work within it – I suppose it's just not my favourite world. In terms of the CCRU itself, I had hoped that the unit was established enough to survive my own departure; unfortunately this turned out not to be the case. In relation to my subsequent choices and directions, I suppose I now aim at variety, and try to avoid long-term or far-reaching commitments with any of the institutions with which I deal. Of course the danger here, as with any self-employed person, is that one ends up with a hundred different bosses instead of just one!

CL: To come back to your current research, one of the main concerns around mobile phones is, of course, the dangers of microwave radiation, both from masts and from the

phones themselves. How does this fit with the more positive perspective that you take on these technologies? I ask because this reminds me of the later sections of *Zeros and Ones* when you discuss “the greatest pollution crisis the earth has ever known” – the increased levels of oxygen in the earth’s atmosphere resulting from global cooling and the effect that this had on the dominant like form of the time, prokaryotes. Although catastrophic at one level, this led to a massive complexification of life through parasitic and symbiotic relations. There seem to be parallels with, and perhaps an implicit critique of, some contemporary environmental movements in this idea – a certain tendency to privilege certain orders of purity and deem all contamination and mutation to be a bad thing. What is your own take on the ecological movement, and the contemporary crises of pollution associated with technologies of mobility – both as radiation and car exhaust/global warming?

SP: Zeros and Ones is a polemical and provocative book, and it does indeed have a go at all notions of the natural, in terms of social orders, individual identities, and environmental stability, largely by questioning the whole notion of what is natural in the first place. My misgivings about environmentalism relate to the fact that attempts to preserve the environment so often find themselves allied to more negative and potentially dangerous forms of protectionism, hostility to trade, urban life, migration, etc. I’m not suggesting that there’s an inevitable slippery slope to fascism here, but I do think we have to be careful not to go too far down this road. The oxygen revolution discussed in *Zeros and Ones* is, because of its immense scale, a fascinating example of the ambiguity of pollution, although this would of course be no consolation if one belonged to the anaerobic world. But it does serve to remind us that we are not always, if ever, in a position to know what’s going on and where the developments with which we live will lead. Of course there are extremely negative effects associated with mobility – the consequences of our rampant burning of fossil fuels seem clear, and although I am genuinely uncertain about the implications of mobile phone and mast radiation, there may well be some serious issues here as well. And I’m by no means saying that all pollution is good pollution – this would be as ridiculous as the assertion that what we consider natural should remain so for all time. But I would still maintain that even global warming, which seems, from our perspective, to be such a devastating phenomenon, may look very different further down the line.

CL: Does this indicate some kind of shift in perspective akin to the famous revolutions of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud? Each of these thinkers served to decentre the human in some way, whether by refuting the idea that the Earth is the centre of the universe; that humans are separate from the animal world; or that the rational ego is at the centre of human existence. What you seem to be suggesting here is a complete break with the human as a foundation for perception. Whilst from a fixed, human perspective global warming might seem terrible, from a more abstract perspective – perhaps focused on life itself – this may not be nearly so disastrous. My question would be: what does this mean for the formulation of ethical and environmental concerns? Is it possible to have an a-human ethics, for example, or is the ethical project itself bound to a kind of humanism that is unable to cope with radical change and difference?

SP: My own thinking on these themes is sadly very tentative – but they are certainly urgent questions, and they are, perhaps, difficult to answer in anything but humanist

terms. Foucault, of course, made gallant efforts to develop an antihumanist ethic, but I suspect that one has to climb back inside the human, as it were, to deal with questions of how humans should behave. Having said this, I do feel that all our ethical and political questions would be greatly aided by an awareness of how small our own lives really are.

the authors

Sadie Plant was born in Birmingham. She graduated from the University of Manchester with a PhD in Philosophy in 1989, and taught Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham before becoming a Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. She left the academy in 1997, and since then has been writing, travelling, and speaking at events around the world. Among her current interests are the themes of mobility and grass-roots trade – not least because of her recent work on mobile phones, some of which is available as a report commissioned by Motorola, *On the Mobile*. Sadie Plant's book include *Writing on Drugs* (Faber and Faber, London, 1999, and Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 2000), *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (Fourth Estate, London, 1997, and Doubleday, New York, 1998) and *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (Routledge, London, 1992). Further information can be found on her website at: www.plants.demon.co.uk/sadie.htm

Chris Land is a research fellow in the Innovation, Knowledge and Organizations Networks research unit (IKON) at Warwick University, where he also teaches organizational sociology. His research interests lie primarily at the conjunction of the sociology of technology and post-structural philosophy where he is currently completing a PhD thesis bringing together actor-network theory, Deleuze and Guattari and William S. Burroughs to interrogate the idea of the (post)human.

Address: Industrial Relations and Organizational Behaviour Group, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK
E-mail: christopher.land@warwick.ac.uk