



Collective low-budget organizing and low *carbon* futures: An interview with John Urry

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Introduction

In his recent book *Societies beyond oil* (Urry, 2013), the sociologist John Urry historically traces the growing reliance on oil in welfare societies caused by a growing dependency on inventions made possible by coal fired steam engines. The car, long distance travel via train and plane, mass production and consumption of cheap goods and the consequent types of industry-based work have co-shaped and organized daily life in the city and its urban forms. Whereas the energy dense, storage-able and mobile qualities of oil seemed plentiful and cheap for a long time, Urry's book is a thought-piece on four different future scenarios looming now after peak oil, as stagnating economic growth and an aging demographic reorganize social, political and economic life. Some of these scenarios are grim – depicting resource wars, high tech and exclusionary ways of living, and the detriments of a more resource-efficient but mainly digital life without much movement or face-to-face interaction. The last scenario however is that of a 'low carbon society' and has a more optimistic, at times even romantic, outlook of how societies may cope with scarcity while still enjoying the pleasures of relatively wealthy societies. The scenario is based on experiences and ideas of organizing life with limited resources by 'de-energizing' the way societies are organized. According to Urry, such powering-down assumes that prosperity, equality and welfare can be maintained despite lowering consumption of goods and services (Urry, 2012: 205). Still, the majority of people in the UK, for example, believe that their children will have a lower standard of living than themselves, but Urry reminds the reader that such a discouraging outlook goes hand in hand with a re-valuation of what is considered a good living standard –

as something not narrowly defined by GDP measures alone. The fact that less young people in the described welfare societies value the ownership of a car – neither as status symbol nor as necessary means of transportation – is only one expression of such a trend (*ibid.* 208). The contributions of the present *ephemera* special issue, ‘Saving the city: Collective low-budget organizing and urban practice’ show many more of such examples: people exhibiting a new valuation of what was formerly considered waste by creating online reuse-networks (Foden, this issue), re-appreciating collectively organized and affordable provision of food in *milk bars* in Warsaw (Podkalicka and Potkańska, this issue), exploring car-sharing options and organizing food-cooperatives in Manchester and Birmingham (Psarikidou, this issue), using vacant urban spaces creatively for small scale entrepreneurial activity in Bremen (Ziehl and Oßwald, this issue) and so on. Such ‘green shoots of a powered down future’, as Urry would call them (Urry, 2013: 204), can be considered as an appreciation of non-economic values, such as community support and cooperation, self-organization on local scales, slower lifestyles, and trust, all of which have gained a higher regard than material ownership or having a large income. In these examples, the lack of the latter does not necessarily seem incompatible with maintaining a particular life style. Moreover, they seem to reorganize the city in ways which the influential American urban planner Jane Jacobs already promoted in the 1960s: slow modes of travel, neighbourhood cooperation, more face to face talk, residences mixing with businesses, less urban zoning, and the absence of extreme differences of income of those living near to each other by way of producing goods and services in a simpler way and repairing them nearby (Jacobs in Urry, 2013: 213).

There may be some romanticism lurking in Urry’s vision of ‘low carbon societies’ and it raises ample questions about issues of scaling, (in)equality, exclusion, North/South distribution and other tensions implicit in such practices. Representatives of a more critical urban studies may reject Urry’s trust in small-scale local experiments as little and temporal islands reserved for a concerned but exclusive middle class present in welfare societies and whose potential for up-scaling, redistribution and broader structural change by creating strategic alliances is crushed by an encroaching welfare state retrenchment. How are questions of poverty and uneven distribution of these life-styles addressed in such future scenarios? How can such practices be scaled up to the city without producing exclusionary mechanisms, and how can it stimulate people’s incentives to change? These are some of the questions that we aimed to address in our interview with John Urry.

Interview

P and B: In your book, you write about a possible future based on a wide array of groups, organizations, experimenting conceptually and practically with many post-carbon alternatives. So maybe to start off, can you provide us with some specific examples of alternatives?

John: If we look globally, we'll probably see tens of thousands of ideas, prototypes, innovations, groups, and campaigns devising alternative car systems, alternative homes and alternative energy systems, to then the things I am interested in, which are the prototypes of ways of living which are somehow or another concerned with the carbon footprint. So what I was trying to catch here were the semi-organized phenomena that are emerging, a kind of low-carbon, global civil society, in which of course each is not only in and of themselves, but in various kinds of ways, exchanging, collaborating, modelling, using examples from one another. So it's low-carbon civil society as an emergent phenomenon.

P and B: But we can see, of course, that this is a lifestyle choice – the decision to live more locally or ecologically. Yet also these sorts of practices are emerging out of necessity and cost-saving. Those who have been affected by austerity in Spain or Greece have stated that they do turn to online flat-sharing networks like 'Airbnb' in order to rent out part of their flats to survive. So can you comment on the link between austerity and this move towards a low-carbon society?

John: I suppose I am talking about two kinds of things. In a way, one is what you call an individual lifestyle. But then there are those kinds of developing models and alternative prototypes of a central system that might instigate more of a political shift. And of course it is sometimes one and the other, and they do connect. So I totally agree that austerity would appear to be kind of stimulating these alternatives, however some of them sort of predate this. That would be very fascinating, and perhaps that's what some people in your issue are doing – is examining the interplay of discourses of austerity, and discourses of low-carbon, and how those interconnect, and are interconnecting, and are producing something that is sort of different. And it kind of relates to the idea of peak travel, and peak car, for which there is a limit – so the peaking of that and at the same time the fact that this started pre-2008, pre-austerity, but which clearly is austerity-linked and something we clearly seem to be reinforcing and then reflected in the way the decreasing proportion of people who have driving licenses or are driving cars.

P and B: This is a very hard question for any researcher studying such subcultures. In what instances do these practices take hold and become a larger phenomenon which

becomes cemented in society, and in which cases do they stay limited to just the hipster urban niche?

John: I definitely don't have an answer to that. But I mean I think that language of what is a niche, and what becomes a system change is very interesting and something I have been discussing recently with researchers who work on cycling and e-bikes. But these phenomena are interesting because of the relations that drive them. I can not be particularly bothered about some more people starting up cycling – but what these practices do, be it in Central London or wherever, is that they provide a model of inspiration to other activities. So it is the potential national and international impact and relationalities that may come to be established which is what may move a niche to be something more part of a system.

P and B: So the netting and embedding of these practices in larger networks?

John: Absolutely.

P and B: Well another question we have is that most low-carbon practices, at least initially, require more investment than something that is already established. As you say, we are reliant on our established network, so why would we go off and invest in a new network and a new system? For example, in the Low-Budget Urbanity research project, we study among other things ecological communities which break outside of their standard, established water filtering system provided to them by the city, and invest in another more resource efficient self-built system through small-scale technologies. So aren't these alternative practices just going to stay a middle-class phenomenon? For those who can financially afford a low-carbon lifestyle?

John: I'm slightly less bothered by the issue of whether or not these practices are limited to a certain class or gender. Things have to start somewhere. So it's actually the starting that is pretty significant, and it has to come from a specific social group. The car came from a specific social group too – young men driving and developing cars as speed machines, and subsequent use changed. So the question is does it spread? Does it move? So I think it is worth to talk about more the many efforts to push these various phenomena out, to move them out beyond the young, male model.

P and B: So then wouldn't the question not be about who is adopting it, and what group is adopting it or not, but what is the technology that creates this seed of change. You mentioned in your book that we are now not thinking about the practices that we can develop to scale-down on oil consumption, but rather we are waiting for an innovation that would directly replace oil.

John: Yes indeed. But I suppose my point would be that there is no technology without its social uses, and the way in which these technologies are embedded in practice. Often that is expressed by saying that there has to be a business model. And I like to say that there has to be a business and a sociological model. Like a true empiricist (laughs). What are the patterns of life, or as Elizabeth Shove would say, what are the new forms of practices that various technology may come to be embedded. And nothing will become a system unless its both of those – the social and the technological. The social and the material getting to be assembled together as an astute new system which then makes it difficult to take over, difficult to imagine the world before that system took over and imagine a re-worlding. So my question, because I have no answer to this, is what would produce a low-carbon, re-worlding?

P and B: So perhaps let's talk about policy measures. You wrote that it took 50 years for the rich North to bring about a significant reduction in tobacco smoking. Despite the scientific evidence, smoking was ubiquitous. So the other question is, how do we power-down fast enough? Do you see any concrete possibilities for scaling down? Is it about policy?

John: I think it's about everything. But I don't know if I could tell you the order. It's about policy, it's about new kinds of sociability that seem more fashionable. What might make luxury and richness unfashionable? How could somebody sitting in their Jacuzzi in their 4-star hotel think more modestly (laughs)? How can modest lives be fashionable? And that relates very much to societies and norms. The disapproval of excess. So it is policy, it is cultural change, and it's new kinds of technologies and economies that somehow make that possible. And it's nowhere near there, and certainly not there in a way in which we can imagine future being conceived of, outside of the rich of the North perhaps. But the rich North is quite interesting, and of course it's still the most powerful bit of the world. So what happens here is significant. And I sort of now see a kind of plateauing. But somebody might say in criticism – 'well that's all jolly interesting John but there was as much of this force and experimentation in the 1970s', which I also talk about in *Societies beyond oil*. I think the 1970s is very interesting – this is when there was a lot of interesting post-oil discourse and environmentalism is one of those visions that stemmed out of that. So the 1970s is an interesting period – with calculation, experimentation, car-free days. Jimmy Carter was putting solar-panels on the roof of the White House in the 1970s. So there is a set of trends that was pretty interesting then. But what happened also then, among other things, was a neoliberalization with Regan and Thatcher, and they started stomping on that from 1979 onwards. Which introduces the questions of power and economic and political systems in all this. So this is one of the massive problems in talking about this.

P and B: Then can the shift happen where prosperity and economic wealth is replaced with a networking wealth? Where what counts is that we know where we can borrow goods, whom we can share with, where the local market is happening? Perhaps this is what the whole discourse around the sharing economy is proposing a new future with the increase in access and information?

John: I totally agree that's an interesting possibility. But there's lots of things that get in the way of that. Massive amounts of things get in the way of that. Yet it's kind of got a small momentum, and it has to start somewhere, and I don't quite care where it starts. But the question is, can it grow, can it be generalized, what are the conditions of the existence of you know, such a lower carbon, sharing system, and one of the things I talk about in *Societies beyond oil* is this 'do you reverse the existing system, or do you develop a new system, which somehow in the end makes the old one redundant?' [...] Putting a system into reverse gear when it's going fast, or fairly fast, is extraordinarily difficult. So I like these buttons that we fool around with, that generate new systems that somehow over time makes the initial system redundant. Which is a bit like mobile phones and landline phones or I suppose the internet and pre-existing telephone forms of communication, or fax machines. I think fax machines are very interesting historically. I remember when every office had to have a fax machine, it was like the really, really cool thing to have in an office. Or the really cool thing was to have a fax number. People would say: 'oh yeah, I'll send you my fax number'. And you'd think they were terribly important people. [...] So the whole history of socio-technical change is, I think, the most important resource for thinking futures.

P and B: One of our last questions is about the city. Rather than relying on resources that are sourced from beyond the city (the farm, or the oil refinery), there are urban trends that try to create urban life cycles that makes cities less independent of external resources. How do you see these developments, what capacities do you see in cities to organize low carbon societies and powering down?

John: Those are all pretty interesting, and some cities do develop that now on quite an impressive scale. And some cities will have policies and coalition of interests. And some ways in which people will be communicating more because they bump into each other in their part of their localized networks. But reversing large-scale agriculture seems to be quite a massive challenge, in a situation in which the population is growing. So probably massive reductions in agriculture outputs if you were really to localize, is pretty tricky. And what is a city, if you're thinking of Shanghai, or Beijing, or Seoul, to do? This is such a scale of food resources or water, and so far oil, that you need to generate to support 25 million people. I mean a farmers market in the middle of Lancaster is very easy, but a

farmer's market in the middle of Shanghai – they would have to travel two hours to get there. So I think it's all sorts of things about scale that are tricky when talking about alternatives in cities. Some of that is more to do with again, sort of models and visions.

P and B: The last question is a more personal one. You discuss in your book that the possible futures can be either a dark and full of resource wars, or one of an increase on community life and networks of support. Looking at what is happening in the world, did you get more pessimistic over the years? Or perhaps have you shifted your view of how society will adapt?

John: Well when I talk about offshoring in my newest book (Urry, 2014) – I guess I would be more pessimistic, although I don't like using those categories. I think the scale of the forces which are moving societies in a fully, strongly, high-carbon way, are pretty phenomenal. And if they were not dented much by 2007/2008, they require a lot to be dented let alone reversed, I suppose. And one of the reasons for that is this huge growth of what I would call the whole variety of offshoring processes. One of which I would see would be the problem of tax. You said that low-carbon innovations require funding – and they also require funding in ways that seem fair. And tax is not fair. And obviously Occupy movements, etc., have protested this and brought on a new politics of taxation onto the agenda. Almost every major company in the world is a tax avoider, if not a high evader. So the scale of avoidance is embarrassing. Routledge, which is owned by Taylor and Francis, which is owned by Ingenta – which is based in Switzerland for example... you can't avoid it. And this means that most of these major entities are not paying their fair share, or anywhere near their fair share. So they are inducing the rest of the population to pay their fair share, to have a sense of 'sharing' and mutual obligation. And this is really, really demanding. So while you have this low-carbon civil society on the one hand, doing interesting things, you also have this proliferation of interdependent offshore worlds, which are going in quite the opposite direction....

P and B: Thank you so much John for that.

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references

- Urry, J. (2013) *Societies beyond oil: Oil dregs and social futures*. London: Zed Books.
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John Urry is Distinguished Professor in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. He helped to develop the 'new mobilities paradigm' for social science research and works on issues related to mobilities, complexity theory, tourism, transportation, contemporary capitalism, climate change and low carbon futures. He is the author of many books including *Mobilities* (Polity 2007), *Climate change and society* (Polity 2011) and *Societies beyond oil* (Zed 2013).

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