Mobility and its discontents in (sub)urban Australia

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Abstract

Australians are one of the most mobile nations on Earth: their spatial, residential and employment mobility is among the highest in the world. In an economically dynamic and successful nation, mobility and ‘flexibility’ are seen to be ‘good for the (capitalist) economy’, especially employment mobility, which is closely related to residential mobility. In terms of spatial mobility—travel, internal and international, as well as long stays overseas—Australians successfully beat the ‘tyranny of distance’. On the individual level, intense mobility is usually seen as an advantage, privilege and a mark of success—a status symbol, although younger age groups and lower socio-economic groups can be involuntarily mobile due to casualisation of work and unstable housing. Also in more general terms, there are dark sides to intense mobility that rarely get a mention: economic dynamism driving mobility is in turn driven by a culture of excessive individualism and consumerism. Apart from well-known environmental woes associated with a hypermobile consumer society, this also leads to the erosion of community connectedness and social capital, and an increase in social inequality. This short paper looks at some root causes of Australian hypermobility and its social effects.

Key words: Mobility, Australia, individualism, consumerism, community, social capital

Introduction

This paper explores social causes and effects of Western late-capitalist hypermobility, using the case study of Australia, one of the most dynamic nations on Earth in terms of spatial, residential and employment mobility. Western capitalism of the last wave of globalisation rewards the ‘virtues’ of flexibility and mobility, especially in regards to the labour force. Capitalist economy needs an urban-concentrated but flexible workforce focused on economic rewards and consumption. Flexible labour force implies residential and employment mobility, which in turn depends on the willingness of people to move residence, change jobs and travel for the purpose of work. The rewards of mobility, in money and status, are linked with the firmly established social value of competitive individualism. The latter is said to be indispensable for economic success, individual and collective, based on work ethic, productivity, entrepreneurship and innovation.

By seemingly offering limitless opportunities, globalisation is a context that intensifies people’s desire for unrestrained mobility. Among the Australian middle classes, mobility has become a sign of success and a marker of social status. Successful people regularly travel overseas for business and pleasure. Australians traverse their vast country-continent by road and air, and willingly expose themselves to the high cost and inconvenience of long flights when travelling overseas. Overseas travel is a prominent middle-class social talking point and it secures career and social status rewards. Longer journeys and stays overseas, often for study, work and tourism combined, have been a rite of passage for young (middle-class) Australians in recent decades, and they remain a considerable career boost for Australian professionals.
Apparently, spatial mobility is associated with residential, employment and social mobility that are also high compared with other developed countries. It should be mentioned that social mobility—the advance in one’s social status usually measured by education, income and job status—is considerably more difficult to measure than the other types of mobility. All types of mobility are generally seen as positive; mobility is a privilege, while staying put is often seen as predicament. Living at the same location or working in the same job for many years may make one suspect of inertia and lack of entrepreneurship and success. Intense mobility—Australians perhaps deserve the attribute of hypermobility—is often seen as an aspect of life of ‘cosmopolitans’, the privileged people able to move spatially and across cultures, as opposed to ‘locals’ who are in many ways stuck and left behind. Since the time Merton (1968) wrote about ‘cosmopolitans and locals’, intense mobility in all its forms have acquired an even more significant role in the Western, and especially English-speaking societies.

Movement and dynamism, requiring considerable and sustained effort, are seen as imperative in global capitalism which relies on competitive individualism to provide motivation and impetus for mobility. This ideological set-up is more pronounced in English-speaking societies than in continental Europe where people seem more attached to place and place-based histories, traditions, communities and identities. For example, Andreotti and Le Galès (2008) argue that European cities have historically been characterised by greater social integration than found in the US. Hobsbawm (1994:342) described the USA and Britain as the ‘ultra-free-market states’, implying high mobility. Clearly, this remark can be applied to Australia. Bauman (2007:1) conceptualised hypermobile dynamic capitalist societies as ‘liquid modernity’ where ‘a pool of choices’ at the same time represents a ‘hotbed of uncertainties’. In this context, according to Bauman (2007:2), ‘community’ [...] sounds increasingly hollow because inter-human bonds that require a ‘large and continuous investment of time and effort’, and are worth the sacrifice of immediate individual interest, are increasingly frail and temporary. Sennett (1998:24) expressed the same sentiment when he talked about deeper ‘social bonds [that] take time to develop, slowly rooting into the cracks and crevices of institutions’—for which there is little time in the 21st century capitalism. The latter, according to Bauman (2007:3), leaves no room for long durée projects: political histories, as well as individual lives, are a series of short term projects and episodes. Sennett, (1998:10) asked ‘how can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term’ and ‘how can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned’? The well known victims of mobility and ‘short-termism’ are environmental protection and community bonds. A recent Australian report by Kelly et al. (2012:3) diagnoses diminishing of ‘people’s friendships and neighbourhood connections over the past two decades’.

There are population categories, such as young people and lower socio-economic groups, for who residential and employment mobility may not be signs of worldly success—getting better jobs and moving up on the residential property ladder—but instead signify the involuntary mobility of renters in unstable or precarious housing circumstances and unwanted employment mobility from one to the other temporary and insecure casual jobs. There are other dark sides to mobility and its interconnected aspects—spatial, residential, employment and social: hypermobility inevitably weakens place-based social cohesion and capital of neighbourhoods and local communities. High levels of mobility inevitably imply detachment (spatial, social and emotional) from other people, which can be damaging to an individual’s quality of life and lead to psychological disturbances. Such disturbances have consistently risen over the past decades and are often attributed to a lack of human connectedness, anxieties and insecurities brought about by the competitive society, stressful work requirements and anonymous urban living (Davies 2012). Large social surveys have shown that social connectedness is the most important aspect of life satisfaction—more important that economic success, work satisfaction and even health (Cummins 1996). In the rest of the paper the contemporary modes of hypermobility are investigated through residential and employment mobility as manifestations of more abstract and general notions of spatial and social mobility. While the concept of spatial mobility is self-explanatory and briefly addressed above, residential
mobility (changing one’s ‘permanent address’) and employment mobility (changing jobs and places of paid work in general) are addressed in separate sections below.

**Residential mobility**

Australian move houses on average every five years, thus being one of the residentially most mobile nations (Long 1991; ABS 2008). In the working-age population, residential mobility often follows from employment mobility (ABS 2008). In macro-terms, in developed economies, residential mobility is associated with economic growth and development (Long 1991). Residential mobility creates a dynamic housing market, which is a significant section of the Australian national economy and its continual prosperity. A dynamic housing market means rising housing prices and this is advantageous for close to 70 per cent of Australians who are owner-occupiers. Rising housing prices are also shown to encourage consumer spending by homeowners (the so-called ‘wealth effects’, see Case, Quigley and Schiller 2005) and therefore directly beneficial for the capitalist economy. However, this is not beneficial for everyone: for example, rising housing prices make housing unaffordable for first-time buyers, thus disadvantaging younger people. By choosing to be residentially mobile, homeowners normally increase their housing wealth and may also improve their social status by moving to more prestigious locations. Such locations usually have advantages: of being safer and closer to jobs and services, which may positively impact on the movers’ quality of life. A dynamic housing market—moving, buying and selling residential and other properties—is also beneficial for specific industries such as building and construction, real estate agents, removalists, trades involved in renovations and banks that finance real-estate purchases and renovations. It should be noted that high residential mobility defies high transaction costs, especially for home owners; an influential economist described stamp duty as ‘essentially a tax on moving’ that should be scaled down (The Australian 2011).

In Australia, a country often described as a ‘homeownership society’, moving up on the housing market ladder symbolises one’s socio-economic success and social mobility. The concept of housing career, fully accepted in Anglo-Saxon housing studies, makes much less sense in continental Europe where people, in spite of relative affluence, are less residentially mobile and more attached to their cities and regions (Andreotti and Le Galès 2008).

There is another side to residential mobility, however. There are people who move houses involuntarily, either forced by high housing cost or by their landlords. The involuntary mobility affects private and public renters and other people in unstable or precarious housing circumstances—young people, those on low incomes, the elderly and those who fit into a broad definition of ‘homeless’ (Colic-Peisker and Johnson 2010). People in precarious housing circumstances may move down on the residential housing ladder, or move because they are exposed to the inconvenience of the short lease (6-12 months) typical for the Australian rental market (Colic-Peisker and Johnson 2010). Residential mobility generally generally decreases by age (ABS 2008).

Even for the housing wealth-building homeowners, mobility is not just advantageous. Moving house every five years means little chance of developing deeper local roots or a lasting connection to one’s local community. A sense of place is shown to be related to people’s health outcomes, to their wellbeing and the quality of life—even to weight gain, according to Wilkinson and Picket (2010) who quote research done in areas of health geography, environmental health, environmental psychology and life satisfaction studies. Hypermobility therefore jeopardises the cohesion and depletes the social capital of local communities. High residential turnover and the feeling of detachment especially hurt those who may be in need of local solidarity and support: the unemployed, people on welfare and low incomes, single parents and the rising number of elderly citizens, as well as a rising number of single-person households.
Employment mobility

Politicians and policymakers in Australia and elsewhere often emphasise that ‘competitive pressures’, impacting on local and national economies in the era of globalisation, make a ‘flexible labour force’ and high employment mobility great contemporary economic imperatives. That flexible and mobile labour force is ‘good for the economy’ primarily means beneficial for employers’ and shareholders’ profits and for economic growth, the main conventional indicator of economic prosperity. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) defines labour mobility as ‘people aged 15 years and over who, within the 12 months to February 2012, either had a change of employer/business in their main job, or had some change in work with their current employer/business, for whom they had worked for one year or more.’ The statistics on labour mobility are compiled from the Labour Mobility Survey, conducted as a supplement to the ABS’s monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS). The survey found that 20% (2.3 million) Australians employed at the time of the survey had been with their current employer/business for less than 12 months. Among those who changed employer, there were more men than women, except in the youngest (15-19) and oldest (over 60) age group. Professionals (as per ABS classification of occupations) were the single most mobile group, but overall there was higher mobility in lower-skilled groups, especially community and personal services and retail. Among those who changed jobs during the preceding year, 37 per cent left their last job involuntarily, while 63 per cent left their last job voluntarily, mainly to ‘obtain a better job or conditions or [they] wanted a change’ (ABS 2012).

A recent article in the national newspaper claims that ‘labour mobility is “key to the resources boom”’, which, in turn, is the key to the prosperity of the Australian economy (The Australian 2011). The mining boom also introduced some extreme forms of employment-driven spatial mobility, such as fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) arrangements, now widespread in the booming mining sector. FIFO has been criticised as detrimental to local communities, not only socially, but also economically, as it pushes rental prices up to the levels unaffordable to the local population outside the mining sector (ABC 2012).

Being generally good for the economy, employment mobility may be less beneficial for individuals and communities. For those people who advance their careers through employment mobility, it means challenge and excitement. For many others, it is a curse rather than a blessing, especially for those who are victims of involuntary employment mobility. The latter primarily affects an increasing number of people who find themselves in the casual job market, where job mobility is very high, creating a sense of insecure and uncertain future. Casualisation of jobs makes businesses more flexible and competitive but it is disadvantageous for young employees and those less qualified who find themselves at the ‘wrong end’ of the labour market and who may be moving from one short-term and often also part-time and poorly paid job to another.

Even for those in relatively secure employment and building careers, lifelong employment is largely a thing of the past. In the 21st century, staying in a job for too long is rarely a sign of loyalty or being good at something—it rather often signals a lack of ambition and entrepreneurial spirit. Interestingly, research shows that academics are one of the most mobile sections of the population.

Is mobility a drain on social capital?

Influential sociologists of the early 20th century were intrigued by massive urbanisation in Western Europe and developed overseas countries and its effects on people. Simmel (1903) argued that modernity and the urban life were potentially damaging to people. In large cities, people not only lose touch with the natural environment and are exposed to crowding, noise and pollution, but also live anonymously, among strangers, competing with them for housing, jobs and other scarce...
resources. Of course, such a view may lead to rural and small-town life being romanticised. There is a community control side to every cohesive face-to-face group. A respondent in her mid-20s recently explained how moving from a small town in New Zealand to metropolitan Melbourne was primarily for the privilege of not being observed and judged in a community where ‘everyone knew everyone’. She said that moving to an inner-city flat initially seemed a mistake: ‘There were people everywhere, in the flat above... But now I got used to it, it’s okay’. In spite of the spatial closeness, this was the anonymous society she was looking for.

Whether people prefer a large city or a small town/village as a setting of their lives, it is hard to deny that mobility and community are closely intersected concepts. However, community is an overly complex notion that this short paper cannot engage with. In the simplest sense, community is taken to mean a cohesive group of people connected by multiple ties: similar values, interests and lifestyles. The mobility associated with modern Western individualism is purported to be dismantling the spatially defined communities and strong social connections that are, according to a considerable number of authors, crucial for a ‘healthy’ society and wellbeing of individuals (Kelly et al. 2012:5; Eyles and Williams 2008). Mobility has potential to give rise to transient, mobile, pluri-local or even ex-territorial (e.g. virtual) communities, and dynamic and flexible networks indifferent to national boundaries. Intense transnational mobility, often associated with an ‘expatriate lifestyle’, according to Piegoto (2001:1039), leads to ‘easier dissolution of local ties and an increased commitment to the international organisational channels’. It may thus be creating ‘professional diasporas’ and profoundly changing, and challenging, the role of ‘communities of place’ and nations in determining values and defining people’s identity and belonging. However, is it conceivable that mobility transforms rather than endangers the community (Gille and Riain 2002)?

In spite of negative aspects that contemporary moderns, entitled to individualism and associated freedoms, attribute to close-knit communities, research has shown that the community connectedness is crucial to people’s wellbeing (Kelly et al. 2012). People’s sense of security, belonging, ease and peace is dependent on a feeling of connectedness with other people: neighbours, friends, acquaintances, work colleagues, and even strangers we encounter on a daily basis. As mentioned, social connectedness is the main ingredient of life satisfaction. On the other hand, weakening of community life and the growth of competitive consumerism are interconnected, and both are related to a rise in inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Inequality in turn weakens the cohesiveness of communities.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have argued that community life has weakened under the impact of growing geographical and social mobility. Australian local communities are certainly not tightly knit anymore, if they ever were. We do not know our neighbours because they move in and out fast. In contemporary urban Australia people are more likely to find a ‘nucleus of friendships’ at work, and the workplace is where they can feel valued and supported—although they can also feel insecure, bullied and under heavy competitive pressure to perform and outperform others. Even if one is lucky to be able to rely on work mates for emotional support, these work friendships are doomed by high job mobility.

In (sub)urban Australia, most people are spatially and also emotionally detached from their neighbours, but highly connected and ‘networked’ on the internet. Bauman (2005:78) diagnosed a ‘disintegration of locally grounded, shared community living’ (Bauman 2005:78) and argued that community has been largely replaced by ‘network: a matrix of random connections and disconnections’. On the one hand, the individual is liberated from the constraints imposed by community control and community obligations that mark the contexts of dense social bonds; on the other hand, s/he lives in a fragmented and atomised social world (p.14) where self-responsibility increasingly substitutes for social solidarity. The latter is epitomised not only in informal communities but also in the welfare state, whose care has been reduced over the past decades
(Bauman 2005; 2007; Sennett 1998). In the highly mobile, competitive and individualist context, community care, civic responsibility and common good become secondary considerations (Kelly et al. 2012). Best (2010) argues that altruistic actions are perceived to be irrational, outrageous and repellent in a modern society sustained by consumer interests that promise instantaneous gratification and happiness. It is symptomatic that more and more often academic and political jargons resort to the concept of ‘social capital’, with its capitalistic and economic undertones of calculability and precision, rather than to the more complex and ‘softer’ concept of community when refereeing to everyday forms of human connectedness.

**Conclusion**

In Australia and other English-speaking developed nations the processes of community erosion—often conceptualised as diminishing of ‘social capital’—have been detected (Kelly et al. 2012). The loss of social capital and the rise in social inequality with all its negative side-effects belong to the dark side of the intense mobility marking contemporary global capitalism. These processes have a potential to erode life satisfaction and people’s mental health. In a society where community connectedness and the welfare state have been on a long-term wane, the individual has a primary duty of self-interest, self-care and self-help, and hence little time and energy left for solidarity with others and the ‘common good’. It is often argued that ‘virtual’ connectedness, enjoyed in solitary sessions in front of one’s computer, are a new manifestation of community, but it is yet to be seen whether this new internet-mediated connectedness, social media and instrumental networking can replace deep personal and face-to-face community bonds which require time and therefore a certain level of sedentarism, as opposed to intense mobility, in order to develop and endure. It is also questionable whether ‘global consciousness’ and a rather abstract cosmopolitanism can compensate for the gradual transformation of long-term friendships, cohesive extended families, transparent urban neighbourhoods, community-mindedness and care for the common good into quaint relics of the past.

Rather than regretting the disappearance of some dubious ‘golden age’ of community and deploring the dwindling social connectedness and its gradual replacement by taken-for-granted individualism, consumerism and status-seeking, one may ask whether this process is unstoppable and irreversible. This is a difficult question, of course, and its answer depends on how one interprets the root causes of the processes analysed in this paper. To address this issue, we need to understand the temporal (fast change and fragmentation) and spatial (mobility) aspects of the community crisis. This short paper provides some pointers for such an analysis but further research is needed to analyse these processes in their wider cultural, socio-economic and political contexts and stipulate whether alternative processes are possible and under what conditions. The forces that may counter hypermobility and erosion of social bonds may be found in the need to face global environmental challenges and a global rise and increased visibility of non-Western cultures that may contribute different ways of relating to nature, society and the self.

**Footnotes**

1. In this paper meaning the past 3-4 decades—the era of increasingly cheaper long-distance travel and internet communication.

2. The concept of social mobility also pertains to inter-generational changes in social status, which are still harder to measure; this paper is not concerned with this aspect of social mobility but rather with social mobility of an individual through her/his life course.
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