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# 8 Biography and Narrative in the Times and Places of Everyday Life

IAN BURKITT

Like all sciences, sociology – which is the disciplinary base for many narrative approaches – has its own narratives to make sense of the contemporary world. In recent years many of these narratives have shifted to make sense of the radically altered socio-economic state we now find ourselves in. Many stories go like this: we are now living under ‘flexible accumulation’ (Harvey, 1990), a new form of global capitalism where all national barriers to the flow of capital have been removed, empowering multi-national corporations over nation states and individual citizens. Gone are the days of state managed capitalism and, with it, gone also are the days of jobs for life, of living out one’s days in relatively stable communities of fellow workers, long-time neighbours, and extended families. Now our lives are flexible lives, to be uprooted at a moment’s notice to find work or better opportunities. To describe this (post)modern condition, the metaphors of sociological stories have also changed, picturing a transformation from ‘heavy’ capitalism, to a ‘light’, ‘fluid’ (Bauman, 2000) and ‘flexible’ capitalism that, in turn, has created new flexible individuals who experience an ‘unbearable lightness of being’. For Sennett (1998), this has created the conditions for a ‘corrosion of character’ – character meaning the long-term aspect of personal traits valued by self and others – for in a world where people are always starting over again, in new jobs, work-teams, or neighbourhoods, many have lost the witnesses to their days.

However, this storyline, like all narratives, is extremely complex once one gets below the surface. As Gergen (1994) has pointed out, there is never a single narrative providing a linear theme that runs throughout the biography of an individual, nor, by extension of this idea, can there be a single narrative that unifies the themes of an author telling a story of society. For example, as a Marxist, Harvey (2000) wants to tell other stories about resistance to flexible accumulation, and, as a geographer, about the spaces of hope that exist in everyday life which provide the basis for this resistance. Likewise, Sennett is interested in the coherent narratives people create in the face of flexible capitalism, how they maintain a sense of personal responsibility and meaningful coherence in their lives through narratives about ‘career’.

As for me, as someone with a background in sociology, but one who is interested in how the sense of individual self is formed within a social context, I have told stories of social selves, about how the sense of individuality we all have is inextricably bound up with our fundamental inter-relatedness. But this inter-relatedness, as we experience it in everyday life, is located in particular places and changes with time. As we live out our personal biographies within particular places, our relations to other people change. We may encounter new people in new or familiar places, along with existing colleagues, friends, lovers, acquaintances or enemies. When we recall certain encounters in their times and places, we do so through narrative, binding together events and happenings, giving them a meaning through stories. However, what interests me here is how larger global influences impact on the places and times of biographies, sustaining or disrupting routines and habits of life, along with the relations to others we try to sustain as social beings. Under the conditions of flexible capitalism, where people are regularly uprooted from jobs and localities, from family, friends, and neighbours, what happens to the narratives that give some meaningful coherence to our lives? How do we tell the stories of life lived in fragments? And, if this is uncomfortable and uncertain for us, how do we resist through our narratives and actions?

This narrative quest, then, will be concerned with untangling the way that time, place and others – the very fabric of our everyday life – is woven together by narrative, and what the splintering of time, place and relations, brought about by flexible capitalism, has done to our narratives. But like all narrative approaches, this cannot be separated from the idea of biography, which ‘render[s] intelligible historical action in context’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000: 8), or the way that social history and individual biography are joined together, as Wright Mills (1959) famously put it.

This meeting of history and biography can be fraught with theoretical and methodological difficulties. Rustin (2000: 45) has claimed that, in biographical work, societies and cultures must be studied from the ground ‘upwards’, the ontological assumption being that individuals have agency, which leads to the conclusion that biographies make society and are not merely made by it. While I have some sympathy with this, I think the ontological assumption is skewed: where history and biography meet there must surely be reciprocal interchange, with individuals able to shape their biographies in various ways, but always within social contexts not entirely of their own making. As I hope to show here, the places and social contexts within which individuals create meaning and devise strategies for their lives are a co-production, sometimes of many individuals stretching across enormous vistas of time and space. Biographies cannot simply be the products of individuals and, in many cases, people have to be hugely creative in order to salvage agency and personal narratives in a global world that often moves with a momentum beyond their individual control. It is, of course, important to avoid social reductionism, by showing

how individuals have a subjective or psychological position within their objective or sociological location in the world. Two people in the same objective social location can create contrasting biographical narratives, from which standpoint they relate to the same social setting in different ways through the strategies of action they adopt (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In this way, because of aspects of my own biography, recounted earlier, I have an ambiguous relation to postmodern discourses and remain critical of them. Individuals are not over-determined by the social, although ontologically it can set the parameters in which we act.

So how do history and biography meet in flexible capitalism, and what are the strategies people can adopt for salvaging a sense of narrative continuity in the world? I will address this question by examining how biographies are composed of time, place, and others, and how narratives help to weave all this together into meaningful coherence. Threaded through the larger sociological narratives about change in contemporary society, is the biography of Paul, with whom I recently did a biographical interview<sup>1</sup>, who has first hand experience of many of the social changes I will be talking about here. Although one biography cannot prove or disprove larger sociological theories, nor can it be taken to represent biographies in general, it is nevertheless interesting to see how this one personal story both reflects and resists social change. It also illustrates my central theme: how wider social changes have affected the everyday lives and biographies of individuals and, with it, their narratives.

### **Biographies in Everyday Life: Time, Place, Others and Narrative**

Back in the 1970s, the French Marxist Lucien Seve (1978), wrote about the biographies of individuals living in capitalist society. From Seve's Marxist position, a person's biography was made up of the activity they engaged in, through which they assimilated their social and cultural heritage and, thus, a biography could be divided up according to the *time* an individual had to engage in various activities. Most peoples' lives are divided between the time they have to spend on activities that hold a personal interest for them – usually in their 'free time' – and the time they must spend on activities done for others. In the latter category, most of this time belongs to an employer, who uses the worker's activity to extract surplus value. From the worker's point of view, this is 'abstract activity' with little personal sense or gain, while activity done in their own free time is 'concrete activity' and can be spent on their own self-development or enjoyment. In addition to this, Seve also split the time in a

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was done in one session lasting about an hour and a half, and was recorded by note taking during the interview. This is why only snippets of actual quotations appear from Paul's own words, the rest being my reconstruction of the general contours of the narrative from my notes.

person's biography between that spent on learning new activities – which would be the most rewarding, with the acquisition of new skills and capacities – and that spent on repeating activities already learned. For Seve, the limiting and exploitative nature of capitalism was expressed in the fact that for most people, certainly the working classes, most of their time is spent on boring repetitive tasks, the sole purpose of which is to make money for capitalists.

While some aspects of Seve's ideas about biographies are still interesting, especially in the way he understands them as shaped by the time people have for different activities, the overall tenor of his writings speak of another capitalist age. Although Seve never says this explicitly, his writings conjure up a world in which work is regular and routine, with the carving out of biographical time monotonously predictable. One can picture Seve's workers with their shoulder to the grindstone, seven to five daily, coming home for their hours of leisure and dreaming of their pensions. I can see this world in the life of my own father, who worked in the same Yorkshire textile mill, seven to five each day, from age 14 to 65. It was only after retirement that his life seemed to begin, with more time to spend watching rugby and cricket and going to the horse races. But so much of this world has now changed. Work is no longer routine in terms of regular hours, with more flexible work practices being introduced, such as shift work and working across the seven-day week. In addition, who can rely on a job for life, working in the same occupation, let alone for the same company, for the span of one's working life.

This has had two effects on biographical time. More flexible working patterns within the day, with shifts often varying week to week, have meant that biographical time is more disrupted, people finding they have less ability to plan the time they will be able to spend with family and friends. Some financially poor workers find this flexibility allows them to do more than one job and, in general, across the board, most workers are working for longer hours (Hertz, 2001). A Marxist like Seve would no doubt see in these working conditions the existence of greater exploitation, with a large number of workers working more of their time for capitalist corporations and having less free time for themselves. The greater encroachment of routine work into biographical time would, under these conditions, lead to the stunting of personal growth.

The second effect on biographical time is more long term: indeed, as Sennett has noted, one of the effects of flexible capitalism is that there is 'no long term'. In his extended essay, *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett (1998) recounts meeting by chance with Rico, the son of a worker he had interviewed 25 years earlier for another study. While Rico's father had worked in the same occupation all his life and lived in roughly the same locality, his son had already had a number of different jobs and moved around the country. What this meant was constant relocation for himself and his family in various places, never staying long enough to feel that they belonged. Worse still, this involved losing friends made in particular places, breaking previous relationships that

were either lost or kept alive through the Internet. The new neighbourhoods into which the family moved were not empty of sociability, but the people there were used to others moving in and out – to the making and breaking of temporary relationships – and the social bonds formed there lacked a feeling of permanence. As Sennett remarks, no one in these communities becomes ‘a long-term witness to another person’s life’ (1998: 21). Sennett’s book is full of such stories: broken narratives of relocation and of constantly starting all over again.

But the biggest dislocation reported in all these stories is the dislocation in time, and the feeling for many that they lack control over their time. During busy times at work, children become strangers to their overworked parents, and new technologies provide managers with new means of controlling work-time. At call-centres or in offices, even working from home by computer, managers can monitor the number of calls taken or the amount of time spent working at the computer.

As I was listening to Paul’s story, many of the sociological theories of modernity and flexible capitalism started to come alive for me. Paul is a 40 year-old man who, like me, has always lived in the West Yorkshire area of England. In terms of his working life, he looks back at his past and says that you could divide his CV up into four year chunks: four years spent doing one job or running a business, four years doing something else: a working life lived in four-year fragments. At the present moment in time, Paul works for a large bank selling insurance from a call centre. His description of this work bears out much that is written about working life as it has become subject to new technologies and, thus, new forms of control. In the call centre, a dialler contains all the phone numbers that each worker must call in order to sell an insurance policy and it also records the number of calls made each day. At the end of each call the salespeople have five minutes to ‘write up’ each call on computer and, when they are finished, they press a button on the dialler to call the next number on its list. The dialler also records how long each call takes and how long each salesperson is waiting for someone to answer the call. In addition, calls are often recorded to make sure that a thorough list of products is being offered to potential customers.

Managers also monitor the salespeople, making sure they spend no more than five minutes writing up the results of each call. Workers at the call centre developed a technique of ‘slacking’ by staying in update (that is, writing up their calls) longer than the allotted five minutes, thereby dictating the pace of the calls. Managers spotted this strategy and began warning salespeople who stayed in update too long. The whole process is therefore rigorously monitored, and Paul tells me there is little opportunity for ‘slacking’ among the workers, so that there is little they can do to control the pace of their work. This leads to ‘burnout’, with workers becoming demoralised and literally ‘giving up’ on the job, or adopting a ‘couldn’t be bothered’ attitude to targets. When they hit burnout, workers move to other parts of the company where work is more interesting or manageable, or just move on to another company. Paul has now hit that point and has just moved to another section of the company.

While Paul felt that his current job allows him plenty of free time away from work to pursue other interests, he has worked in places before – and knows of plenty others – where the shift systems play havoc with the possibility of normal life patterns or of maintaining a social life. In this respect, Paul currently counts himself lucky.

However, despite the micro-management of time within the working day, it is the destruction of the long-term time duration within flexible capitalism that most affects people's lives. This is reflected in the narrative snippet above, where Paul talks of his working career being divided into four-year segments. Sennett (1998) asks what are, for me, crucial questions about how people can make their lives and selves under such conditions. 'How can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society? How can durable social relations be sustained? How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?' (Sennett, 1998: 26). In particular, how do we develop 'those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnish each with a sense of sustainable self [?]' (Sennett, 1998:27). This is why flexible capitalism can corrode character, because it eats away at the very social fabric that sustains a long-term narrative of self, one that is created with others in relations of loyalty, commitment and purpose.

At this point, however, there is a danger of getting carried away by a too linear and simplistic sociological narrative. Flexible capitalism has not only enslaved us in new regimes of micro-management of time, and disrupted the possibility of developing long-term biographical narratives solidly located in place; it has also freed us from some of the shackles of the past. Comparing myself with my father's generation, which stayed in jobs and places all their lives, my own biography is freed from some of these restrictions. As an academic, I can choose to a large degree when and where I work, although some of these freedoms are under threat. I am not bound by the rigid timing of the working day that my father experienced in the textile mills, or that Paul is subject to in the call centre. In the global world of academia, I could also try to relocate myself in another country if I so wanted, and many of these freedoms are becoming available to a wider group of people. As Bauman (2000) has remarked, it sometimes feels as if the only compulsion that governs modern life is that we are all incessantly compelled to choose. Giddens (1991) has also talked of the greater reflexivity in modern life, where biographical narratives are no longer set by tradition – by moral codes, work routines, or roles – passed from generation to generation. Instead, in post-traditional societies, we have greater personal control over our biographical narratives, looking to various forms of knowledge, such as self-help books or therapists, to decide how to live.

But these freedoms are highly variable under flexible capitalism, with the creation of what Lash and Urry (1994) refer to as 'reflexivity winners and losers'. That is, the control of time and place, and thus the control over the creation of one's biographical narratives, depends on one's class location and, with it, the power and privilege people have to shape their lives. It is therefore questionable to fix in advance, as Rustin (2000) suggested, the ontological assumption that biographies make society and are not merely made by it, because the experience of people in this respect will be variable depending on their power to influence their own biography. For example, Sennett has found that 'flexitime' – people working on different, individualised schedules – has resulted in work in the evenings or nights being passed on to the less privileged classes (1998: 58). Those with more choice over how and when they work are mainly among the more privileged, who can also afford to bear some of the risks that go with the more flexible, short-term capitalism. An example of this would be the well-networked and internationally respected academic, such as Kenneth Gergen (1991), who finds thrills and opportunities in the challenges of 'postmodernism'.

What is most interesting in Paul's story, as far as narrative and everyday life is concerned, is what his experience has taught him about life and how he understands his life. As I already noted, Paul sees his working life as divided into distinct four-year periods: he spent four years working for an electricity company, four years running a business, three years at University studying for a degree, and since then a number of years in various sales jobs. His biography has taught him the lesson of a flexible and unpredictable world. When asked about the future, Paul made it clear that he has no plans beyond the immediate year, professionally or personally. He clearly felt that 'a year is a long time', and that 'anything can happen between now and next year'. This lesson comes in particular from the last company he worked for being sold and all the employees being made redundant, and also from the breakdown of a long-term relationship. If you can't know what is going to happen to you in a year, it is better not to plan and to be prepared for anything. However, these sentiments were not expressed with a hint of fatalism, more a readiness to meet future challenges head-on, and a feeling that he is now better equipped to deal with uncertainty and the unforeseen.

Comparing these experiences with those of our fathers' generation, who kept jobs and relationships for life, Paul did not express a hankering after the past. The high turnover of employees at the bank where he works is an illustration of the way people now switch jobs as easily as our parents' generation would change a suit of clothes, but again this uncertainty can also provide opportunity. Paul felt that if you were looking for a promotion or another position, this provided the condition for rapid opportunities: 'you're not waiting for someone to die' before you can step into a better position or a more interesting job. The fact that a career is no longer carved out for life is a problem only 'if you're directionless'. In other words, if people themselves lose a sense of direction and purpose, if they begin to drift aimlessly or get depressed, then they are lost. There is no preordained path to

save people from drifting. Furthermore, Paul has seen the failure of those who work with him who believe they can find an easy niche for themselves and stay there: for those who think 'the place owes them a living', he has seen 'doors shut to them'. Employers now look for direction and motivation from their employees, despite the fact that they are more closely controlled than ever.

So for Paul, the past is fragmentary and the future unknown: but the world of insecurity is also loaded with possibility.

Looking at this sociologically, Paul's narrative reflects many themes in the work of Giddens. Paul is stating clearly that one has to be in charge of one's own biographical narrative, to have a sense of direction, in order to find one's way in the modern world. Traditional, custom bound routes through life do not exist anymore. As an articulate and educated person, Paul also clearly feels he has some of the necessary power to be able to find his own direction and steer his life on that course. But the narrative fragment above also reveals a paradox, that while in the modern world an individual is expected to find their own way through life – and in the workplace employers expect more self-direction and motivation – organisations are generally less willing to give people autonomy. This means that many encounter the strict and detailed management of working life, and of organisational life more generally, while outside of this there are few guidelines for living a life.

Alongside the control of biographical narratives and one's direction in life, there is another important distinction opening up in flexible capitalism, one that also marks the difference between social classes – the experience of surface and depth, and the relative ability to exploit the advantages, and avoid the disadvantages, of the two. As Sennett (1998) notes, less powerful workers do not always gain the knowledge and skills to attain a deep understanding or mastery of their task. Where understanding of work is superficial, the identity of the worker is 'light'. The flexible productive process – in which workers can be moved around easily and interchanged – is characterised by user-friendly tasks whose deeper logic need not be penetrated. In contrast, workers higher up the social scale tend to have more qualifications and to acquire the deeper levels of knowledge and skill at work. Sennett does not say so, but in comparison to the light identity of lower level workers, the identity of the more powerful, skilled workers, has greater weight. Their biographical narratives have more continuity, bound as they are into the development of career through the acquisition of skills and knowledge that contribute to the building of character.

Although he still sells insurance, Paul has now moved to another section of the bank and his reasons for doing so are interesting. His new work involves him looking after the 'premier customers', that is those with a high income who are already customers of the bank. This job brings a higher income, but more importantly it allows him to deliver a more personal service to clients. Gone is the

dreaded dialler, meaning that Paul can now manage his own time and regulate his pace of work. This allows him to build a rapport with his customers and also deal with the brokers of the insurance policies. Instead of being at the mercy of the dialler, Paul now has the ability 'to manage a case'. What this means is that he can get involved in this work in a deeper way, not just staying at the surface of the task, attempting to make a quick sale. He has to have more knowledge about what he is doing and to go into each case in more depth, but also he is building relations with customers and brokers, and using his communication skills. It is this that helps to give this new work greater depth: he is not just learning more, he is able to involve himself with the people he is dealing with, making the work more meaningful. Paul also has greater control over work-time and this has reduced the stress he felt from the repetitive nature of his previous section, controlled as it was by the technological and personal surveillance of tasks.

The current job also offers Paul the possibility of learning new things and developing skills. There is the possibility of him becoming a sales coach and taking the courses connected with this. His work would then involve becoming the leader of a sales team and teaching other team members new or better sales techniques. This would widen even further the scope for Paul to develop different types of social relations with those with whom he works.

Here, we find Paul not only beginning to manage his own time and deepening his knowledge of the job, he is also using and building qualities of character in relation to others through his work. An all-round sense of control, depth and character is reflected in the above, and we will find this in other areas of Paul's biographical narrative. For now, though, we can say it is the degree of control each of us has over biographical time, place and selection of narratives, that marks out our social class location, along with the power to resist some of the more destructive forces of modern society. There is no sense of narrative coherence to bind together an identity when one is constantly subject to change that one cannot control. Again, under such conditions, the experience of being is one of lightness rather than weight, of insubstantiality and a lack of anchoring. As Milan Kundera says in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the more weighted we feel, 'the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become'. Without weight, we 'become only half-real, [our] movements as free as they are insignificant' (1984: 5). Kundera then asks, 'What shall we choose? Weight or lightness?' But the ability to choose between these two ways of being in the world is as variable as our other choices, dependent upon our power to choose. A professional person may feel they can gain weight and depth through their work, while in their private life opting for many relationships with little commitment or permanence. Their being, like everyone else's, would be a mixture of lightness and heaviness.

This is something missed in many postmodernist accounts of contemporary social life, which characterise the fluid and fragmented selves of contemporary society as 'schizophrenic' (Jameson, 1991) or 'multiphrenic' (Gergen, 1991).

Yet a character that was only light and fluid would, in Kundera's terms, experience them-self as not real, as floating above the earth, with no substance to their being or their needs. Such a character would in fact suffer from 'depersonalisation' (Laing, 1959), without a sense of the reality of their existence. While 'liquidity' and 'lightness' may therefore be fitting metaphors for many aspects of contemporary society and biography, it is perhaps mistaken to see 'solidity' and 'weight' as metaphors that apply mainly to the past (Bauman, 2000). To give life a sense of reality, individuals may well adopt strategies and create narratives that make identities solid enough to be recognised by self and others, while leaving some freedom of movement to accommodate change.

As individuals we do have different degrees of power and ability to establish some depth in our lives, along with a degree of narrative coherence to our sense of self. Individuals who have less power to affect these things may feel themselves more open to the exploitative side of flexible capitalism, and even those who have the power of choice still need to resist its corrosive effects. One strategy of resistance, identified by Sennett, is to adopt the narrative of 'career' to salvage a sense of coherence, agency and responsibility in the face of a continually changing world. He takes Lippmann's definition of career, which is a narrative of 'inner development, unfolding through both skill and struggle' (Sennett, 1998: 120). With this there develops a sense of responsibility for one's conduct that is bound into a more long-term vision of life, one that is leading to some aim or has purpose. All aspects of flexible capitalism would seem to undermine the possibility of such a narrative, and yet Sennett found people – who had ostensibly been the victims of flexible capitalism – developing just such a narrative. They were ex-employees of IBM, computer programmers who had been laid off when that company began to fail in the 1990s. After explaining their predicament through narratives which, first of all, blamed the managers of the company, then the globalisation of the economy, the men eventually settled on a narrative in which they figured as having miscalculated their own careers by not seeing the trends developing in their own industry. They then began to develop narratives of career, through which they started accepting responsibility for not taking more chances in their professional lives, instead staying with IBM for the long-term company benefits (which rapidly disappeared as the company hit trouble).

Even though the theme of the narratives was failure rather than success, the programmers began to tell stories in which they figured as agents, possessed of will, choice and responsibility. The stories also followed a traditional narrative pattern that was centred on a period of crisis – in this case, losing a job – which became the locus of change and transformation. This narrative convention makes the crucial moment of change 'legible and clear, rather than messy, blind' (Sennett, 1998: 131): it is a focal point in a continually developing saga, rather than the chance that leads us nowhere. In taking responsibility and

agency through this narrative there is also established at its centre the sense of 'I' so common in autobiographical stories (Stanley, 1992). The sense of 'I' is established in the face of conditions that demand the flexible pliant self, one who can bend and adapt to all the conditions that flexible capitalism can throw at him or her. However, as Sennett points out, these narratives are not simple acts of resistance in the face of an indifferent social, political and economic system: they speak of the deep pain that comes with failure, especially in middle age, when many find themselves considered to be past the cut and thrust of new, aggressive industries. Sennett (1998: 134) says, 'given the destruction of hope and desire, the preservation of one's active voice is the only way to make failure bearable'. This is so because, through the very structure that a narrative provides, it acts as a form of healing, a way of recovering from the wounds inflicted by a fickle world.

However, Sennett's concept of career applies only to the idea as it bears upon the world of work and the trajectory this sets us on across the life-course. Yet the notion of career can be applied to the narratives we develop to order our lives more generally. Indeed, Goffman used the term 'moral career' to refer 'to any social strand of any person's course through life' (1961/1991: 119). This course will involve a sequence of changes in a person's self and in his or her framework of imagery for judging self and others. Because the notion of career involves changes, an important aspect of it is the way we constantly reconstruct the view of our career when we look back over our lives. Furthermore, this reconstruction involves not only our view of the past, but also of our present and future. A career is never a solid or stable thing, for it is thrown into periodic states of reconstruction that select, and sometimes distort, in order to form a view of the self. According to Goffman, we often distort the facts or events of our lives because a moral career is constructed with reference to the moral values of the social group, and we are inclined to present a favourable view of ourselves. When our story can be presented as good or worthy we tend to cast ourselves as a central character at the heart of it, yet when the story is not so presentable we tend to disclaim responsibility for the way things have turned out. Instead of being the agent of the story, the 'I' who makes things happen, I become the victim of circumstance or chance. However, this was not what Sennett found; for those he interviewed, the claiming of agency and responsibility was enough, in time, to help them come to terms with failure.

It is clear from Paul's story that he feels himself to be the main point of agency in the narrative. His changes of direction in terms of career, which seemed to happen every four years, he reflects upon as his own choice. Interestingly, he sees this as stemming from success rather than failure. That is, it was when he achieved everything he felt he could in a job, or saw the possibility of getting more out of life by a change of direction, that he took the plunge and did something different. However, that is not the whole story. Paul also clearly expressed the view that life

had taught him that you can't plan too far ahead, that you don't know what will happen to you over the course of the next year, so that it is not possible to be in control of every move you make. Indeed, when referring to the fact that he hasn't sought employment in the subject area he studied at University, Paul says he lost interest in the subject because he changed so much over the three years of study. In other words, he changed in ways he could never have predicted, so that something he thought he might pursue as a career, he ended up not pursuing. There is a strong counter theme in this narrative of learning these things from experience, that life cannot be known in advance and controlled.

As Paul is reconstructing the narrative of his moral career, it is clear that he locates himself as a powerful 'I' at the centre of the narrative, choosing when to make moves and knowing the reasons for this. The reasons given are ones of success, of having achieved something and then moved on. Paul is therefore generating what Gilbert Ryle referred to as 'thick' rather than 'thin' description (in Geertz, 1973). That is, he is not simply recounting a series of changes that have happened to him, he is looking for the deeper sense of meaning to these changes and using this to create his narrative. One could say this is the generation of 'thick narrative', one in which he is also locating the points and the meaning of his own agency. At the same time, there is a counter narrative at work in the whole narrative where there is a sense of circumstances – and even of the self – changing in ways that wasn't controlled by Paul's own agency. These are not necessarily failures attributed to some other agency, as Goffman would have it, it is rather the acknowledgement that biography is never completely within one's own control: changes occur, and one must accept them with good reasons or adapt to them. No matter how powerful an individual may be there are always limits to that power, and this shapes biography and influences narrative.

### **Narrative and the Places of Everyday Life**

The effects of flexible capitalism are contradictory, for just as it appears to be driving many into forming more coherent, or 'thick', narratives in which the self figures as an agent, so too is it encouraging people to seek out the 'thickness' of place. I have already said here that my aim is to search out the kind of narratives that bind together places, moments and people, and that it is dislocation in place, as much as in time, which is fragmenting human experience in flexible capitalism. Interrelated people are always embedded in places as well as in time, and these factors figure in their different, though connected, stories. In addition, there may also be a search for more encompassing narratives than the purely interpersonal ones. While this may not constitute a reconstruction of grand-narratives, in Lyotard's (1984) sense, it nonetheless means a search for a wider social group – a 'we' alongside the 'I' and 'you' – with whom we can constitute our stories.

For geographers, place indicates 'an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural', as opposed to the 'volumetric void' of space in which all things exist (Casey, 2001: 683). Place, then, has a more experiential and subjective aspect than the notion of space, for it is the actual locations in which our lives take place. As the arena of action, places are constitutive of our sense of self, for they are the location of embodied agency, the sense of 'I can', and they also embed our biographies. We have also seen how narrative continuity is linked to place, because those workers who are dislocated and forced to move around the country, or the globe, in search of work are also the ones whose sense of character is most under threat. The sense of dislocation caused by constantly moving between places puts the sense of self in jeopardy, as places are 'thinned out' and merge with space (Casey, 2001: 684). For example, in Sennett's study, Rico found that relations forged in one place could only be continued after a move through the Internet. While this provides a new means of keeping alive relationships that would, in earlier times, have died, the Internet constitutes a thinned out place, for these interactions are not embedded in a specific place. Rather, they are suspended in space. The densely enmeshed infrastructure, in which life used to take place, is now replaced with more ethereal interconnections.

These 'thin' places are also open to continual reshaping and reconnecting with others; they are as flexible as the capitalist society that created the technology, which in turn makes the transformation of place possible. Programmes on television or items on the web melt into each other as we switch channels or surf the net (Casey, 2001: 684-5). However, as Casey goes on to point out, the more places are levelled down, the more individuals seem to seek out the thick places in which personal enrichment can flourish. Casey gives two examples. First, the proliferation of films on video and DVD has not meant the end of cinemas: on the contrary, more people than ever are going to

cinemas, finding them to be ‘real places with their own sensuous density and interpersonal interest’ (Casey, 2001: 685), where people can collectively participate in experiences. Second, Internet book-selling has not brought about the demise of the bookshop: instead, there now are bigger bookshops than ever, many with their own coffee bars where people can read, or meet and talk. Possibilities such as these have actually created a richer environment for selves, who can now move between actual places and virtual spaces, between embodied and disembodied relations.

Once again, we find here the illustration that certain postmodern narratives – filled with metaphors of surface appearance and fluidity – may be too one dimensional because, in the face of such conditions, people are searching out ‘thick’ places and narratives in which relatively coherent selves can thrive. In seeking out the thickness of place, along with more long-term relations and coherent narrative, there is also the sense of people finding places where they belong, in which they can orient themselves and feel at home. One of the unintended consequences of flexible capitalism, then, is to strengthen people’s attachment to place, and to intensify their longing for stable relationships.

There is one part of his life that Paul sees as not open to change, and that is the place where he lives. Paul has lived his life so far in one city in West Yorkshire. Asked if he would be prepared to move to live somewhere else, Paul clearly said that he wouldn’t, expressing the view that it was important for him ‘not having to start over again’. So while Paul has accepted many of the challenges of living under flexible capitalism in his working life, he is not prepared to uproot and start again in some new city or area of the country. When asked why this is, Paul stated it was to do with practical matters like having to sell his house and find another. However, he also said he feels ‘settled’ where he lives, which seems to indicate a sense of belonging to a place.

But there is also another aspect to feeling settled in the place he lives. A constant theme in Paul’s narrative is the importance of relationships, both at work and in his personal life, and relating to others is clearly something that he regards as interesting and important. One of the main reasons Paul gives for selling up his successful business and going to University as a mature student, is that he and his partner had little time to build friendships outside of their own relationship. University was therefore seen not only as an intellectual challenge, but also as an opportunity to meet other people, freed from the time consuming enterprise of running a business. Indeed, since starting University, and from graduation onwards, Paul has built up a network of friends located in the same region. He also has family in the area and, one could venture to say, that this – the location in place and its association with various relationships – provides a backdrop of continuity and shared history in Paul’s biography. Feeling settled in the place he lives also provides a framework of stability as well as continuity in an otherwise uncertain world. This seems to be the point of resistance in Paul’s narrative, the part of his life he seeks to protect from change, the sense of belonging someplace that he seeks to continue into the future.

While there is no sense from Paul's narrative of being rooted in a particular community – there is no 'we' to which the story constantly refers – there is nevertheless the strong sense of the importance of 'personal community'. That is, the importance of friendship groups and of building relationships at work.

This seems to be the point of stability and resistance in Paul's narrative, where he roots himself in a sense of shared continuity and history. It is also clear that place, and the personal relationships it contains, is the binding which allows him to create a sense of sustainable self. His belonging to a place and its people provides the social fabric that can sustain a long-term narrative of self and a moral career – a base from which he can reconstruct a narrative shared with others that accounts for all the changes that have happened to him.

### **Conclusion**

According to Plummer (1983), the study of life stories in their various forms provides a truly humanistic method for the social sciences. However, this cannot be a form of humanism as we have known it in the past, for example in the works of Sartre (1948), where humans were seen to have an inherent essence of freedom. Biographies are rooted in the places and times of history, and narrative charts the course of individuals through that history as they reconstruct stories that give meaning to the events, happenings and relations of their lives. In doing so, the construction of careers and moral careers help individuals to locate themselves as points of agency in their stories, but not absolute ones. Personal records of present times also speak of the difficulties of this process, of having to come to terms with the things one can't control – the inevitability of change brought about by unforeseen personal circumstances, but also by a globalised world not within one's own control. The best one can do in these circumstances is to look back and tell stories which, even in recounting missed opportunities or disasters, find the point of agency: the moment when one could have done something different or where one learns from experience. But perhaps the most important thing in all of this is the salvaging of agency and resistance, by finding some coherent and thick narrative that gives meaning to life and allows people the possibility of shaping aspects of their biographies. We are not just the light, fluid, flexible creatures of postmodernity: rather, it is still possible to search out the conditions in everyday life which make the world a home for us, supporting coherence and continuity in our narratives and giving weight to our being.

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