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Situating Auto/biography: Biography and Narrative in the Times and Places of Everyday Life[1]

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My aim in this piece is to situate biography and narrative in the historical times and places of 'flexible capitalism' and 'liquid modernity', which has created significant changes to everyday life. The end of economic conditions that provided 'jobs for life' has meant the collapse of long-term time frames, and created a necessity for people to move from place to place to seek out work or progress in a career. This has affected individual biographies and narratives, by breaking up the structures of time, place and social relations in which biographies were traditionally located. I assess the effects of these social changes through the analysis of a biographical narrative. From this and other supporting data I suggest that profound change is occurring in individual biographies, which is highly variable depending on social class position. However, it is still possible to develop life strategies and reconstruct narratives in ways that resist some of the more corrosive aspects of flexible capitalism eating away at the fabric of everyday life.

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 and, to do so, they employ metaphors of 'flexibility' and 'fluidity'. For example, to Harvey (1990) we are now living under 'flexible accumulation', a new form of global capitalism where all national barriers to the flow of capital have been removed, empowering multinational 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,

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long-time neighbours and extended families. Now our lives are flexible lives, to be uprooted at a moment's notice. Bauman (2000) characterizes this as a transformation from 'heavy' to 'light' capitalism, which is indicative of a new 'liquid modernity': that is, the current phase in history where all social forms and relations solidified in specific places are uprooted and made transient in time. For Sennett (1998), this creates 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.

My aim here is to begin to understand the effect of these social changes on the auto/biographies of individuals and to question whether the sociological narratives that seek to explain them are reflected in, or contradicted by, biographical narrative. If we regard biography as that which 'render[s] intelligible historical action in context' (Chamberlayne *et al*., 2000: 8), then the condition of flexible accumulation or liquid modernity should have profound effects on the ways in which individuals attempt to construct a biography with others. Indeed, these social conditions would seem to splinter the times, places and social relations – the very fabric of everyday life – in which biographies have traditionally been nested and that provided the context for people to render intelligible their historical actions. If people can never settle in jobs, towns or cities with groups of long-term or medium-term companions with whom to share their lives, how has this affected the coherence of the narratives they construct to make sense and meaning of themselves and their historical actions? According to Bauman (1995), in a society where time fragments into a series of episodes, there can be no consistent or cohesive life strategy or narrative to deal with the world or make sense of it.

However, the sociological story lines of flexible accumulation and liquid modernity are, like all narratives, 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 capitalism, 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 meaning in their lives through narratives about 'career'. And Bauman realizes that while modern society attempts to evaporate all solid forms into liquids and make them fluid, this often results in contradictions. For example, in order to be recognized by others there must be

something about one's identity that is relatively substantial and which does not change from moment to moment. There is, then, a contradiction 'of self-made identities which must be solid enough to be acknowledged as such and yet flexible enough not to bar freedom of future movements in the constantly changing, volatile circumstances [of liquid modernity]' (Bauman, 2000: 49–50). So the search for identity must at certain points make solid what is fluid and make form out of the formless. How we achieve this in our biographies and narratives is another central concern of this piece.

Overall, then, quoting C. Wright Mills, one could say that here I am attempting to 'work out and revise [my] views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect' (1959: 225). However, this intersection 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 individual agency 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 sociological location in the world. It is in this sense that I hope to show here how individuals can resist social forces, solidifying part of their experience and looking for sense and meaning in fragmented social contexts. Individuals are not overdetermined by the social, although ontologically history sets the parameters in which we act and can make our biographies.

So how do history and biography intersect 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 did a biographical interview.[2] Paul is a 40-year old man who has always lived in the West Yorkshire area of England and has first-hand experience of many of the social changes about which sociologists are concerned. 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 social change and demonstrates resistance to it. 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 is made up of the activity they engage in, through which they assimilate their social and cultural heritage, and, thus, a biography can be divided up according to the *time* an individual has 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 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. Equally, while my mother did not do paid work, her working life was centred around the home, fixing her biography in a way that was typical for many working-class women of her generation. 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. Also, 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? In addition, most women now have to juggle paid work outside the home with unpaid domestic work for partners and/or children.

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 (Sennett, 1998), and, in general, people in the UK are working for longer hours (Hertz, 2001). A Marxist like Seve would 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 leads to people spending more time on abstract activities, the result of which is a 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 USA. 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 precious 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 a permanence. 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 (Hertz, 2001), and new technologies provide managers with new means of controlling work time. At call centres or in offices, even working from home by computer, mangers can monitor the number of calls taken or the amount of time spent working at the computer. This is graphically illustrated in Paul's biographical narrative, in which he began by talking to me about his work for a large bank, where he started out selling insurance from a call centre. As I was listening to Paul's story, many of the sociological theories of modernity and flexible capitalism started to come alive for me, especially in his description of his job, which illustrates how working life has become subject to new technologies and new forms of control.

> In his first job for his current employers, Paul spent all of his time in a call centre selling insurance by phone. The workers themselves did not control the pace of the phone calls and the calls were all monitored for time duration and content. 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' the 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.

From my record of Paul's story it seems that while he has time to devote to his own personal development in his leisure time, he regarded work in the call centre as abstract activity and unrewarding, illustrated by the fact it commonly led to burnout. Indeed, his move from the call centre to another section of the bank was because he requested a more personally rewarding position – a request granted to him because he was thought to be a good worker.

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. Sennett 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 parent's generation, which stayed in jobs, traditional roles 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 currently 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. As Giddens (1991) has noted, in late-modernity biographical narratives are no longer set by tradition – by moral codes, work routines, or roles – passed from generation to generation. In post-traditional societies the self becomes a reflexive project involving the constant revision of biographical narratives. To do this we now look to various forms of knowledge, such as self-help

books or taking guidance from counsellors and therapists, in order 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 revision of one's biographical narratives, depends on one's class location and, with it, the power and privilege to shape our lives. Giddens is wrong to imply that we all share the same power and equal access to knowledge on which the reflexive project of the self is based. I would also add that it is 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 'flextime' – people working on different, individualized 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, and they can also afford to bear some of the risks of flexible, short-term capitalism.

Both the advantages and disadvantages of the loss of tradition and the greater flexibility in peoples' lives can be seen in Paul's biography. Below, he was reflecting on his life so far and how he sees this as fragmented and yet full of possibility.

> In terms of his working life, Paul looks back at his past and says that you could divide his CV up into four year chunks: a working life lived in four-year fragments. He spent four years working for an electricity company, four years running his own business, three years at University studying for a degree, and since then a number of years in various sales jobs. 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.
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> Comparing these experiences with those of our parents' 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.

So for Paul, the past is fragmented and the future unknown: but the world of insecurity is also loaded with possibility. Looking at this narrative sociologically, it mirrors Bauman's (1995) notion that contemporary life is lived in fragments and also reflects many themes in Giddens's (1991) work. In particular, Paul's story seems to give credence to the idea of the reflexive project of the self, in that Paul believes one has to be continually revising biographical narrative to keep a sense of direction and find one's way in the flexible 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 revise his narratives and steer his reflexive project of the self. But what he says above also reveals two paradoxes. First, that one must not drift and instead must maintain direction and purpose, and yet one must also be prepared for anything because one cannot know what will happen inside a year. This is the paradox of agency – all of us have varying degrees of reflexive power to revise our own narratives and projects, yet this control is limited by many factors that we cannot influence. Indeed, under the sway of flexible capitalism, the number of unpredictable and uncontrollable elements in life has multiplied. The second paradox is that, in the workplace, employers expect more self-direction and motivation from their employees yet subject them to stricter and more detailed micro-management of work activity.

However, 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 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.

Something of this can be seen in Paul's biographical narrative. Below, Paul was talking about his transfer to a different section of the bank, something he requested in order to give him more personally rewarding work. This involves a search for less abstract and more concrete activity, which has more depth and can add to the development 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. This gives the 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.

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 can be 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.

As individuals, then, we 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. We also have different degrees of power to at least temporarily arrest the flow of liquid modernity and establish with others a character. Individuals who have less power to affect these things may feel themselves more open to the exploitative and corrosive side of flexible capitalism. One strategy to salvage character, identified by Sennett, is to adopt the narrative of 'career' to create 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 globalization 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 auto-biographical 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 says, 'given the destruction of hope and desire, the preservation of one's active voice is the only way to make failure bearable' (1998: 134). 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. 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 to present ourselves as good or worthy. When the story can not be presented favourably, 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.

The location of a sense of agency can be seen clearly in Paul's narrative. Below, he was reflecting on his fragmented working career, but reconstructing this in a way that makes narrative sense from fragmentation.

> 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 random changes that have befallen him, he is looking for the deeper sense of meaning to these changes and locating the points of his own active influence over them. One could say that this is the generation of 'thick narrative', one in which he is locating the points and the meaning of his own agency. At the same time, there is a counter narrative at work within the overall narrative where there is a sense of circumstances – and even of the self – changing in ways that was not controlled by Paul's own agency. These are not necessarily failures attributed to some other agency, as Goffman would have it; rather, it is 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 'depth' of place. For geographers like Casey, 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 (2001: 683). Place, then, is a historical, cultural and interpersonal context for action, giving it a depth of meaning. As arenas of action, places are constitutive of our sense of self, for they are the context of that historical agency of which biographies are composed. I have already said that my aim here is to try to understand how time, place and people are bound together in narrative, and that it is dislocation in place, as much as in time, which is fragmenting biographical experience in flexible capitalism.

For Bauman (2000), it is the dislocation in place and the movement of time that is so characteristic of liquid modernity. This is because solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralise time, whereas fluids do not keep shape for long and are always flowing in time. Thus the period of 'heavy capitalism' was rooted in places – factories, 'heavy plant', purpose built workers' housing, communities – whereas the current period of 'light capitalism' is not rooted in place, but always ready to move. Investment, information, communication, is always flowing and exists in time rather than in place, for these things are associated with mobility and inconstancy. Also, for Bauman, it is those who can move and respond instantly to changing conditions that have power in liquid modernity, whereas those who cannot leave a place at will find themselves locked, as it were, and become the dominated. Thus, '[d]omination consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, to "be elsewhere", and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done' (Bauman, 2000: 120).

However, once again, as we start to apply these metaphors the story becomes more complex. For example, in flexible capitalism many are *compelled to move* to find work or pursue careers, so that this movement is not always synonymous with having power. As Sennett (1998) illustrated in his study, 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). 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 interactions through the Internet are not embedded in any densely enmeshed infrastructure. On the Internet, this is 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. For example, programmes on television or items on the web melt into each other as we switch channels or surf the net (Casey, 2001). However, as Casey goes on to point out, the more places are levelled down, the more individuals seem to seek out the places in which personal enrichment can flourish. He 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). Secondly, 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, the power of individuals seems to be constituted not so much in the ability to be totally flexible and fluid, to have complete freedom of movement, but *to be able to choose* when to move and stay at the surface of experience, and when to be rooted and search out the depth of interconnection with others in a place. If the search for identity is a struggle to arrest the flow and solidify the fluid and to create the thick narratives that give form to an otherwise fragmentary experience, so too is this struggle for identity expressed in the search for places that can add some weight to one's being. In actual places one can construct the kind of interpersonal relationships that one cannot in the thin spaces of the Internet: embodied relations in which we can develop the qualities of character that bind human beings to one another and create for each a sense of sustainable self. This is clearly reflected below in Paul's biographical narrative.

> 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. 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 this 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.

Thus, 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, family, and 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 through place. It also seems 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

While 'fluidity', 'flexibility' and 'lightness' may be fitting metaphors for sociologists to use in telling the story of our contemporary lives, it is far too simplistic to assume that metaphors of 'solidity' and 'weight' are only useful in narratives about the past. Certainly, there has been greater fragmentation of the times and places in which biographies are set, breaking the network of bonds with others and creating a corrosive threat to the formation of character through coherent narratives. However, it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that no consistent or cohesive life strategy can emerge to deal with the social conditions created by flexible capitalism and liquid modernity. While the power to form a cohesive life strategy and continually revise biographical narrative is limited by one's social class, Paul's biographical narrative, alongside Sennett's findings, suggests some interesting possibilities for further research. In particular, how individuals create thick narratives and moral careers that locate a sense of agency,

responsibility and meaning in the face of fragmentation, along with qualities of character that bind them to others and create a sense of sustainable self. Individuals may also have different life strategies for attempting to resist flexibility and fluidity and make aspects of their lives solid. For Paul, place provides stability and continuity, which he guards from change. It forms the bedrock of his biography and sense of sustainable self that allows him to meet the challenges of a flexible world in which he has to have freedom of movement – a more slowly moving undercurrent in his life over which flows more rapidly moving currents and changes. The resistance of social forces found in his rooting in place allows for the more pragmatic approach he adopts towards other aspects of his biography where he has to be ready for any unexpected changes at any time.

Given that under these circumstances modern individuals have to be constantly ready to revise aspects of biographical narrative, as social scientists we may have to rethink our strategies towards notions of self and identity. The theoretical deconstruction of concepts like character and self may only leave individuals more open to the corrosive and exploitative effects of flexible accumulation. This makes it imperative for those of us interested in biography and narrative to be more sensitive to the life strategies individuals are forming to *reconstruct* identity within their moral careers, thus working against the forces fragmenting the times, places and relations of everyday life.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was given as a keynote address to the Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life conference at Huddersfield University, 3 April 2004. I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their comments on that earlier draft.

2 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.

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