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The 'Bizjet set': Business aviation and the social geographies of private flight

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Introduction

It has become something of a cliché – in geography textbooks, at least - to speak of a 'shrinking' world in which communication advances and improvements in enabling technologies are eroding the frictional effects of distance. The sheer increase in passenger numbers and freight movement by air is often presented as the key evidence for this, being indicative of the increasingly routine and frequent nature of flying. The development of new airports, the construction of additional runways, and the provision of new air routes are also grist to the mill for those who identify aeromobility as a key indicator of our 'global times'. More nuanced accounts, however, look beneath the surface of such statistics to draw a rather different conclusion: air travel may be becoming more frequent for some, but this not the case for the vast majority of citizens. As Cresswell (2006) makes clear, airports are not only spaces of the transnational business elites who lifestyles can be described as truly global, but also the space of vacationers, nervous first-time flyers, immigrants, drug smugglers, and a multitude of cleaners, shop assistants, and maintenance staff, many of whom remain resolutely rooted in national-spaces, lacking either the means or inclination to fly.

Accordingly, we begin our chapter from the standpoint that although the world may be becoming smaller for some this is the exception rather than the norm. Alongside speed, there is slowness; alongside the frequent flyer, there are millions – possibly billions – who are unable to access air travel and benefit from the expansion of air services. An awareness of the multiple spaces, mobilities, and power geometries of air travel leads us to our discussion of private business aviation – arguably the most obvious expression of a kinetic aeromobile elite who travel in an exclusive world of VIP suites and private aircraft, far removed from the hassles and delays associated with major

passenger airports. Yet even among the most frequent flyers – transnational businessmen, politicians, sports stars, and members of the putative 'creative class' – there is a staggering variety of ways of flying – from full-service business class (see Bowen, this volume) to a low(er) cost seat on a 'no-frills' airline or a private aircraft specially chartered for the occasion. Consequently, there is a huge difference between the experience of a business traveller on a frequent-flyer programme who passes seamlessly from a dedicated lounge into their business class seat and budget traveller who is forced to walk to the most remote gate at the airport before jostling for an unallocated seat. At the higher end of the market, and in stark contrast to the 'wretched test of endurance' of economy and low-cost travel - 'typified by delays, crowds, the flatulence of your fellow passengers and the cold, hard stares of cabin crew' (Duerden, 2006: 24) - business and first class travel offers passengers enhanced standards of comfort, service, and mobility. For the truly super-rich, however, a private jet is the preferred vehicle of aeromobility. For them, a private jet is a tool that offers unfettered access to global mobility; a means through which to bypass established networks of air routes, create bespoke geographies of personal movement and convenience, and demonstrate their wealth and influence (Hutton, 2008).

As we outline in this chapter, the decision of how to fly is based on a number of interlocking factors, including, but not limited to, convenience, price, and comfort. We contend that each of these possibilities has a socio-cultural significance that goes well beyond the simple facts of travelling from A to B, encompassing ideas of personal status, corporate achievement, and prestige. By focusing on the changing nature and the unique space-times of private aviation, this chapter prises open debates on business air travel to explore the increasingly important role of private aviation as a means of travel and show how the sector is transforming the mobilities of a small but significant (and growing) number of travellers. Sidestepping crucial but perhaps irresolvable questions about whether business flights are necessary or indeed useful in an era of global e-communication, we instead explore the reasons for the growth of the 'bizjet' market, focusing particularly on the supply and demand for private flying before moving on to document the possible implications of

private flight for the ‘global space of flows’. Before describing the emerging geographies of private flight, however, we begin by arguing that studies of business air travel in particular, and movement in general, benefit from a perspective that highlights the material, affective and embodied nature of mobility (Urry and Sheller, 2006), and is duly cogniscent of the difference between different forms of air travel, given that the ‘world of transit doesn’t operate at the same velocity, or in the same mode, in every place’ (Fuller, 2003: 3).

Embodying air travel

> Transportation is more than just the provision of infrastructure, facilities, networks, or investment; it is inextricably intertwined with how humans interact through policies, ideologies, and societies across time and space (Keeling, 2007: 217)

While research into the different facets of air transport has reached new heights of analytical sophistication in recent years, the social and cultural dimensions of air travel remain under-researched and theorised. Indeed, many analyses of flying arguably fall into the same trap as other attempts at mapping global flows of people – they forget that each line on a map actually represents a group of living, breathing human subjects, each of which has their own experience of flying and relates to the plane’s hardware and software in different ways (Dodge and Kitchin, 2004). Adey et al (2007) thus advocate a new social geography of flight that does more than simply reduce flying to a skein of lines on a map or tables of statistics. Yet for many transport economists and transport geographers, this human diversity and richness is lost, and in a world in which millions use the airline network every day, research on average load factors and service frequencies gains more attention than detailed ethnographic studies of *real* passengers. As Adey (2008) contends, discourses and models that merely describe passengers in terms of aggregate units, or ‘PAX’, can only provide an indication of what real passengers look like, think or feel.

Drawing on the work of Thrift (2004), Merriman (2004) and others, we argue for an embodied perspective that recognises that passengers move through, inhabit and transform the spaces of air travel in distinctive embodied ways. The fact that passengers spend the vast majority of their journeys in a sedentary state, strapped into their seat, plugged into the in-flight entertainment, or perhaps working on their laptop, does not mean that the body in flight is passive. To the contrary, it has to actively work to 'get comfortable' (Bissell, 2008), and some bodies have to work harder than others to achieve this depending on their height, physical fitness, the dimensions of the seat, and the leg room that is available. For the very young, the elderly, and those in poor health, the re-circulated, dehumidified, and pressurised air in the aircraft cabin can cause a range of bodily discomforts and health effects, including dizziness, headaches, and nausea. Ebbing and flowing through these states of (dis)comfort, the body also experiences other sensations in flight: the smells and tastes of airline food, the captivating views from the windows, the occasional judder as the plane hits turbulence, the sounds of call bells, engines, in-flight entertainment systems, other passengers' conversations, as well as their perfume, aftershave and body odour. The in-flight body is also affected by the availability of light and fresh air, and the aircraft's air conditioning and lighting systems may be used to promote periods of sleep or activity among its passengers.

In short, passengers are constantly moving and being moved in various ways, with the experience of one flight potentially being very different to another. Embodying the flight in this way thus alerts us to these corporal dimensions and forces us to remember that human beings are of different shapes and sizes, with different cultural dispositions, backgrounds and resources. It also reminds us that human beings are expressive, and this expressiveness is not something that needs to be stripped out of any study of air travel prior to commencing analysis (see Latham and McCormack, 2004). Flying, after all, involves particular kinds of social interaction, as passengers engage with one another, the cabin crew, and the aircraft itself. These relations are enmeshed in gendered, aged, sexed, racialised, and nationalized processes of inclusion and exclusion, creating different subjectivities of what it means to be a

passenger or a ‘flier’. This means that merely conceptualising ‘aeromobility’ as the super-structure of advanced global capitalism, reducing it to a space of flows, does not allow for the sheer diversity of ways of flying or occupying airspace.

Our argument for ‘fleshing’ out analyses of air travel is one that draws on related arguments being made by scholars inspired by the putative ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences. Most associated with the work of the sociologist John Urry, this is evident in a new approach or paradigm in transport studies that does not assume that the world is speeding up for all but takes seriously the concomitant suggestion that new forms of transport also create immobilities and exclusions. As Urry (2001; 2007) points out, both upward and downward mobilities may be associated with the same technologies, and multiple forms of social life may be co-present in the same spaces of transportation. Different people, in short, are networked in different ways, with the new mobilities paradigm concerned with elucidating the different ways that people ‘dwell’ in places that are ‘on the move’. As he notes, studying mobility means thinking about the individual, lumpy, embodied, fragile and ‘embaggaged’ experience of travel, rather than transforming passengers into an aggregate mass of statistics (c.f. Button and Vega, 2008).

But while our key launching pad is the literature on mobility, our focus on the corporal geographies of flying is also inspired by ongoing work in the social sciences on the *affective*. Whilst difficult to characterise, such work takes seriously the notion that there is a constant push and pull of affect between the body and its surroundings (Thrift, 2004). This is somewhat different to the notion of emotion – experiences that are often seen to emerge from *within* – as it stresses that the setting in which emotions arise is more than contextual (i.e. settings have the capacity to affect). Informed by phenomenological ideas about being-in-the-world, work on affect nonetheless grapples with the question as to how we can register the affective dimension, which often appears beyond representation:

> ‘The emphasis is on practices that cannot adequately be spoken of, that words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey – on forms of experience and movement that are not only or never cognitive. Instead of theoretically representing the world, ‘non- representational theory’ is concerned with the ways in which subjects know the world without knowing it, the ‘inarticulate understanding’ or ‘practical intelligibility’ of an ‘unformulated practical grasp of the world’ (Crewe, 2000: 655)

The privileging of ‘ordinary’ people’s knowledge is crucial here, with the politics of non-representational theory stressing the importance of ‘appreciating, and valorising, the skills and knowledges’ of embodied beings that ‘have been so consistently devalorised by contemplative forms of life, thus underlining that their stake in the world is just as great as the stake of those who are paid to comment upon it’ (Thrift, 2004: 46). Or, as Laurier (2001) has put it, it is about valuing people’s everyday competencies rather than the world-views of theory-driven, professional researchers.

In relation to business air travel, we are making the case for moving beyond simple quantitative analysis, or even consideration of the perceptive or aesthetic dimensions of travel, by insisting on the need to think about the feelings, motions and emotions associated with particular ways and forms of flying: the more than human, more than textual worlds of aeromobility, no less. Such an agenda forces us to dispense with rational economic analysis of why people fly from A to B in a certain way to consider questions of what the experiences of flying are, taking in not just the speed or cost of travel, but also multisensory issues of comfort, conviviality and convenience. As we shall show, it is only through consideration of such factors that an adequate explanation for the rising importance of private air travel is possible.

Practised aeromobiities: the growth of business air travel

Geographers have traditionally described the spatial patterns of air transport as a network, with flows of air traffic linking airports that stand as gateways to

global city-regions (see O'Kelly, 1998; Smith and Timberlake, 2002). Castells (1996) argues that this space of flows creates a hierarchy of hubs that can be arranged according to their relative importance and which can accordingly be used to identify cities' centrality in global urban networks. While some researchers have hence examined the geographies of the world city network through flows of passenger and freight traffic between major hubs (Witlox *et al,* 2004; Zook and Brunn, 2006), there has been no comparable study of the geographies of global business aviation, despite a history that stretches back to the early 1920s when large corporations including Standard Oil, Texaco, and Shell began using decommissioned military aircraft to shuttle senior executives between offices and production sites (Sheehan, 2003). This lacuna is due, in part, to the ad-hoc nature of the sector and the lack of data on air traffic movements, but also discourses of commercial confidentiality that preclude empirical analysis of the airline industry's most prestigious sectors. Indeed, many members of the superrich go to extraordinary lengths to retain their privacy (see Hutton, 2008), including, in the context of business aviation, flying in unmarked aircraft and using smaller airports that are well away from the gaze of the paparazzi and the public at large.

What is clear, however, is that the increasingly de-regulated and competitive global air transport market has resulted in considerable fragmentation of the airline product and the emergence of new forms of aeromobility (Budd and Graham, forthcoming). It is no longer merely enough to operate a safe and punctual air service: airlines have to compete for custom by offering the lowest fares, the widest seats, the best in-flight cuisine, and the most generous frequent flyer perks. In an increasingly cut-throat market, dominated by high fuel costs and low margins, carriers are desperate to attract and retain the custom of lucrative business travellers with promises of ever more attentive and thoughtful service and enhanced levels of in-flight comfort (IATA, 2007). Consequently, limousine transfers, complementary spa treatments, lie-flat beds, fluffy bath robes, amenity kits containing designer cosmetics, and on-demand meal services are the norm for most first and business class customers.

Crucially, it is within this context of deregulation and fragmentation that business aviation has expanded its scope and range. Broadly defined, we take business aviation to represent that sector of the aviation industry which 'concerns the operation or use of aircraft by companies for the carriage of passengers or goods as an aid to the conduct of their business, flown for purposes generally considered not for private hire and piloted by individuals having…a valid commercial pilot licence with an instrument rating' (IBAC, 2007). This definition excludes business or first class travel on conventional airlines, but includes the use of aircraft that are flown by a third party commercial operator on behalf of a private client, as well as the non-commercial use of aircraft that are flown on business purposes by company employees and owner-operated business aviation.

Today, business aircraft from all three categories are an increasingly common sight at airports around the world. The world's business aviation fleet currently exceeds 26,700 airframes, and the market represents one of the fastest-growing sectors of the aviation industry. Despite being the near-exclusive preserve of the United States (and, to a lesser extent, Europe) for many years, business aviation is rapidly spreading into other global markets, most notably in India, Russia, China, Brazil, and the Middle East (Sarsfield, 2006; Perrett, 2007; Ingleton, 2008). Given the flexibility and high level of service offered by many traditional airlines, the question remains as to why so many business travellers, particularly from price-sensitive small- and medium-sized enterprises, are using private aircraft. Here, two factors – convenience and comfort – appear to intersect with cost in significant and sometimes contradictory ways. Indeed, cheaper forms of flying may ultimately be judged poor value for money if they are time consuming, provide few opportunities for 'productive' work en-route, and leave the worker-traveller too exhausted and stressed to work effectively. Unsurprisingly, convenience/flexibility and increased productivity have been cited as the principal benefits of business aviation (Ingleton, 2008). However, we contend that these factors are not the only drivers of demand and issues of personal comfort, safety, and security can be just as important. In this way, we place understandings of the body at the forefront of our analysis.

Convenience, flexibility and productivity

In an era where instantaneous email communication, telephony and videoconferencing technologies provide multiple opportunities for long distance communication, the role of business travel is often questioned (see Denstadli and Gripsrud, this volume). However, many commentators have noted that the emergence of a truly global economy requires new forms of team-working, consultancy and secondment where face to face interaction ('facework') is vital. The decisive shift from internationalism to transnationalism is thus registered in the proliferation of business workers - cosmopolitan 'fast subjects' - who dwell in Castells' space of flows, to-ing and fro-ing between the hubs and spokes of the global economy. While conventional airlines draw the world's major cities closer together in a web of interconnecting air routes, economics dictates that only profitable routes with healthy levels of passenger demand are operated and while the most popular routes, such as Madrid to Barcelona, are served with upward of 50 return flights a day, others, such as Norwich to Guernsey or Bristol to Turin, may receive as little as one return service a week. The scheduled aviation network, built around a number of key hubs, thus often requires passengers to route through intermediate airports, adding to the total journey time and distance flown. Need to fly from central London to Madrid? The airline schedules dictate that you leave from London/Heathrow and alight at Madrid/Barajas, both many miles away from the city centre, at times that suit the airlines, not the passenger. Fly on a private aircraft, however, and you can take off from smaller, less congested airfields like London/Biggin Hill or Northolt, at a time to suit you, and land at Torrejon airport away from the bustle of Madrid's main airport. By maximizing direct point-to-point services, business aviation eliminates the delays associated with transferring between flights, and serves shorter routes over which scheduled traffic, with its longer check-in times and fixed timetables, cannot practicably serve (ibid., 2008).

One of the most significant repercussions of the growth of the business aviation sector is therefore likely to be a selective elaboration and expansion of the networked geographies of global flight. Studies in Europe have already

shown that the business aviation network is more diffuse than that of the scheduled airline sector. Indeed, in 2007 business aircraft linked in excess of 100,000 European city pairs, over three times as many as the scheduled market (Marsh and Hammouda, 2008). Like low-cost carriers, business aircraft operators generally eschew the cost, delays, and congestion of major airports by flying to smaller facilities. Unlike their low-cost counterparts, however, the smaller size of business aircraft enable business operators to access a wider range of airports that may not have the infrastructure or passenger handling capabilities to support large passenger aircraft. The use of these so-called ‘reliever’ airports has already had significant implications for some of the larger sites. London/Farnborough and London/Biggin Hill, for example, have developed into major year-round business aviation centres with dedicated executive passenger terminals and maintenance facilities, while other airports see a huge influx of traffic once or twice a year during major sporting fixtures or cultural events (Marsh, 2006). Significantly, while the majority of the top 20 busiest business airports in Europe are located in or near major world cities and business centres, at least three (Cannes, Palma de Mallorca, and Nice) are popular destinations for the so-called ‘jet for leisure’ segment of the business aviation market (Figure 1).

** FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE **

In addition to being able to access airports and airfields that are closer to the intended destination, business aircraft can be chartered at a few hours notice and booked to depart at a time that suits the user. Thanks to the lack of other scheduled flights, passengers can arrive at the airport as little as ten minutes before take off as the lack of queues means security and immigration formalities can be conducted in a matter of seconds. At some airports, customers can even drive up to the door of the aircraft, making the process, according to one operator, ‘as easy as going to a taxi rank and hailing a cab’ (Blink, 2008). Arrival is designed to be similarly rapid, with limousines and helicopters waiting to whisk passengers directly to their meeting.

By freeing users from the constraints of airline schedules, minimum check-in times, and security queues, business aviation is marketed as a solution to the temporal profligacy of other forms of aeromobility that compel passengers to spend hours waiting in airports. ‘Whether you need to fly to Birmingham, Brussels or Barcelona, Airtime Charters will *take you from your nearest airport* with average check in times of just 15 minutes, *you’ll not be hanging around*. Upon arrival, you’ll find your means of onward travel waiting for you, at some airports coming to your aircraft side, enabling *a seamless transfer to your destination*…where you’ll be ready for business’ (Airtime charters advertisement, 2007, our emphasis). By circumnavigating many of the inefficiencies associated with regular air travel, business aircraft are can be conceptualized as time or productivity multipliers that enable users to do more things, with more people, more efficiently than was previously possible: ‘Pack more cities into a day. Avoid the traffic and the crowds. Fly in and out of airports that are close to your meetings. Work with your team on the flight. Be home in time to kiss the kids goodnight’ (NetJets advertisement, 2008).

Passenger surveys have confirmed that company employees feel they are significantly more productive aboard business aircraft than they would have been on conventional airlines or even in their own office. ‘Productive collaboration’ between staff reportedly occurs eight times more frequently than when those same staff were on a scheduled airline, and company employees are reported to be less likely to be resting or reading non-work related materials during a flight (NBAA, 2004). Because of this, operators claim that business aircraft are good for a company’s bottom-line, and cite evidence that suggests that companies that use business aircraft consistently outperform non-operators on many key performance indicators, including cumulative returns, and that CEOs believe business aircraft help them identify and execute strategic opportunities for new relationships and alliances by enabling them to increase contact with clients and develop new markets (ibid, 2004).

In addition to recognising that the demand for convenience and flexibility drives business aviation growth, it is important to note that new developments,

principally the emergence of new aircraft leasing and ownership arrangements, are enabling more people to access private aircraft by making them more affordable and accessible. The price of business aircraft (around six million pounds for a Learjet 45, £15m for a larger Dassault Falcon 2000EX, and £43m for a Boeing Business Jet) means they are too expensive for most people to purchase (Walsh, 2006). In the light of this, new business models are offering potential customers a range of cheaper ways of getting airborne. For example, fractional jet ownership schemes are the equivalent of 'aerial timeshares'. The fractional operator finances the purchase of an aircraft and then recoups their capital by selling flight time to third parties. These schemes allow companies or individuals to access an aircraft for a certain number of hours a year at a fraction of the cost of purchasing the aircraft outright (ibid., 2006).

The price of fractional governorship varies according to the size, popularity of the aircraft, and the number of hours that are required. Clients typically buy a share in an aircraft in 25-hour blocks (or multiples thereof) which range from around £80,000 for 25 hours on a seven-seat Citation Bravo to £800,000 for 50 hours in a 10-seat Dassault Falcon 2000EX (Walsh, 2005). Additional charges for fuel, maintenance, ATC charges, pilots, insurance, and selected add-ons such as catering are also levied (Maslen, 2004). Despite these additional charges, fractional operators stress that the price difference between hiring a private aircraft and travelling First or Business Class on a conventional airline is not excessive (Crainer and Dearlove, 2001). By offering a range of aircraft types, fractional ownership providers can offer bespoke travel solutions for a wide range of business requirements, from short-haul domestic flights to long-haul transoceanic services. Once an account is opened and a 'flight card' purchased, flights can be booked with as little as 10 hours notice and aircraft are available, in theory, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Yet the costs of such arrangements are, for most individuals, prohibitive, underlying that mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relation: far from being a democratisation of flying, private air travel rewrites the global space of flows in the interests of a mobile elite who enjoy a

particular embodied relationship with the spaces of flight (see Urry and Sheller, 2006, 211).

Comfort and class

As has been implied above, the growth of business aviation can be explained as a by-product of global processes that have conspired to make *time* the most precious of all commodities, too important to waste in traffic jams or at airports (Done, 2007; Rothkopf, 2008). Yet alongside convenience there is comfort. For Bissell (2008), comfort is an integral aspect of the corporeal experience, yet it is something that remains poorly defined and often overlooked in academic study (but see Hubbard, 2003). In contrast to the idea that comfort is innate in particular forms of locomotion, or that particular visual ensembles provoke feeling of comfort, Bissell hypothesizes comfort as a specific affective resonance that circulates between a body and the objects it encounters (whether a seat, a plane, or an airport lounge). Comfort is something that, as he argues, develops from a number of other sensibilities, such as solitude, stillness, relaxation and beauty and is a response to a variety of tactile, visual and audio stimuli - including the marketing rhetoric which promises that those traveling in a particular manner will have a pleasant bodily experience. Despite the promises of those who market air travel, comfort is something that passengers strive for, but often rarely achieve, with the body forced to negotiate proximate objects in a variety of ways as it strives to avoid discomfort and pain.

In recent years, airports and commercial air travel have become associated with a range of increasingly unpleasant physical and psychological inconveniences including, but not limited to: uncomfortable seats; inedible food; intrusive security checks; air rage; confusing hand baggage restrictions; claustrophobia; lost luggage; boredom; health concerns (particularly relating to deep vein thrombosis and contaminated cabin air); delays; cancellations; and general feelings of anxiety exacerbated by a loss of control. As the architectural critic Stephen Bayley recently noted:

> ‘Within a generation, what was once a romantic, privileged adventure has turned into a humiliating ordeal...no other experience in contemporary life requires an individual to forgo his [sic] independence and endure such joyless, harrowing regimentation as travelling by plane...what a horrible, inhuman, artless culture air travel has become’ (Bayley, 2008: 29).

While some have claimed that the progressive deregulation of global airline markets has enabled more people to travel to more places, more often, critics contend that the drive to lower fares and increase passenger numbers has in fact removed the last vestiges of comfort that were once associated with air travel and made travelling by air an increasingly gruelling experience (Usborne, 2008; Steel, 2007).

One of the main targets of this criticism are the low-cost or ‘no-frills’ carriers who, unlike their full service counterparts, make few (if any) concessions to passenger comfort or service – seating densities are higher than other carriers, there are no business class seats, and if you want a cup of tea or coffee you have to pay for it (Calder, 2002). These new ways of flying operate in stark contrast to the imagined opulence of the air travel experience of old when passengers ‘dressed up’ for flights and were served afternoon tea on bone china tableware by liveried stewards. However, as long ago as the late 1940s, commentators were suggesting that the only way for airlines to make any money was to ditch these elements of luxury and concentrate instead on providing a safe and reliable air service. ‘The sooner air transport grows out of the salmon and champagne era and gets down to kipper and tea traffic’, wrote a contributor to the *Aeroplane* magazine in December 1949, ‘the sooner it will be able to justify its existence…it is perfectly possible to be decent without providing powder-rooms, cocktail bars, promenade decks and all the rest’ for a benefit of a few wealthy passengers (cited in Hudson and Pettifier,1979: 131).

Now, it would seem, the experience of mass aeromobility has swung the pendulum to the other extreme. In 2007, a respondent to a UK House of Commons survey into passenger experiences of air travel wrote passionately about the profoundly unpleasant experience of flying on “Chavair”, a collective term he had devised to describe low-cost airlines that, he believed, were predominately used by the lower middle classes, football supporters, stag and hen parties, second-home owners, and ‘self employed Costa Tax Dodge chavs’. He remarked that their conduct is ‘often very unpleasant, a good proportion of people shout the length of the cabin, walk around with drinks, use foul language and are generally awful…Everything is charged for and the passengers are given no service’ (cited in House of Commons Report, 2007: 38). Not withstanding the prejudices of class which underpin this analysis, the idea air travel subjects the passenger with a series of uncomfortable encounters with Others is illustrative of the multiple modalities of air travel and the fact that the journey between two points can be too-full of life for some, and not the smooth, seamless journey often advertised and anticipated.

Another factor that has made air travel less comfortable for many has been the introduction of new security procedures at airports. Following the 9/11 attacks, the failed attempt by the ‘shoe bomber’ Richard Reid to detonate an explosive device that was concealed in his shoe on an aircraft, and the alleged plot to blow up seven transatlantic airlines heading for North America from London in August 2006, new security procedures have been introduced which have directly led to passengers’ experiences of conventional air travel declining significantly. On the morning of 10th August 2006, British police acted to stop a suspected plot to blow up transatlantic flights leaving London/Heathrow, possibly using liquid explosives contained in hand luggage. Immediate restrictions on hand luggage were introduced, and passengers were only allowed to carry essential documentation and medical supplies into the cabin. Though the blanket ban on liquids has since ended, at the time of writing, passengers are still only permitted to carry small quantities (under 100ml) of liquid in their hand luggage.

As a result of these restrictions, passengers found themselves subject to

increasingly intrusive surveillance and the time taken to pass through security checkpoints doubled. In the UK, the Airport Operator's Association admitted that: 'The combination of long queues, substantial disrobing and complicated security leaves the passenger with an experience of having been through an intrusive and degrading process (cited in HoC, 2007: 29). Female travellers, in particular, complained that they were subject to intrusive and embarrassing body security searches that left them feeling violated and humiliated, while those travelling with small children reported they were targeted by officious security staff (Sunday Times, 2008; Williams, 2008). In recognition that conventional air travel may all too often represent a 'distressing proposition' regardless of how much passengers pay for their seat, business aircraft operators market their services on 'quality of life' grounds, suggesting that flying by private jet 'offers fast relief from the aches and pains associated with commercial air travel' (Netjets advertisement, 2008). In addition to offering more comfortable seats, fine dining, and personalised service, some business aircraft operators also now mention that their staff will be approachable, polite and courteous and treat their customers with respect, something that conventional airlines do not always manage as new models of in-flight service come to dominate.

As well as serving their traditional core market of high-ranking corporate flyers, aircraft manufacturers and business aircraft operators are also now targeting wealthy individuals for whom a private jet is not only a vehicle of personal mobility, but also a lifestyle choice. Harking back to the early days of passenger flight when flying was adventurous, exciting, fashionable, and fun, the acquisition of a private jet is being promoted as a way to reclaim some of the glamour of flight which has been lost in an age of deregulation and mass aeromobility. For high net worth individuals, the acquisition of a private jet is promoted as the next logical purchase for people who already count luxury yachts, valuable art collections, a string of vintage sports cars, and a number of pedigree racehorses among their possessions (Beaverstock et al, 2004). As with most cars, buyers can customise the exterior paintwork and interior fittings of their aircraft using designs devised by some of the world's leading luxury brands, including BMW and Versace. Learjet accordingly claim their

private jets are the ‘sports cars of the skies’, a ‘perfect blend’ of performance, technology, and style that are flown ‘by overachievers and leaders the world over’ (Learjet website, 2008). In a sector where convenience is taken as a given, industry commentators have noted a shift in customer requirements from corporate to ‘lifestyle’ considerations (Warwick, 2006):

> The Bombardier Learjet 60XR comes elegantly appointed…The spacious stand-up cabin is completed with precious wood veneers, rich, supple leathers and the finest fabrics…[and] the galley’s gourmet capabilities elevate the experience to the exquisite’ (Learjet website, 2008)

A recurring theme in the marketing literature is that these aircraft naturally complement the high-flying lifestyles of the rich and famous and will meet the needs of even the most discerning customers.

> ‘Soaring high above congested flight lanes and unstable weather, in and out of the world’s most challenging airfields, the Bombardier Learjet…the jetset original, exude an irresistible vital force… Unmistakable beauties, Learjet aircraft are the ultimate runway models, famed for their ramp appeal and admired for their constant evolution in design and performance’ (Learjet website, 2008).

For those who demand an even more luxurious aircraft or wish to engage in aeronautical ‘one-upmanship’, larger ‘VVIP’ aircraft, including the Airbus A319CJ Corporate Jet and the Boeing Business Jet (based on the B737) are available (Done, 2007). In 2007, Airbus revealed it had received an order for an executive A380 ‘super jumbo’ from a Middle Eastern head of state. Featuring a hot tub, Bedouin-style tented lounge, a games room, and en-suite master bedroom, the £225m A380VVIP will reportedly be the largest and most expensive private jet in the sky (Bale, 2007).

Underlining that the ways someone travels – their mobility – is never reducable to their motility (i.e. the ability of a person to move socially and spatially), such takes on the geographies of private aviation highlight the ways in which question of status and comfort entwine. As positional and prestige goods, private aircraft carry with them iconic weight and status. Yet unlike some other positional goods, their value is not just symbolic as they are still essentially an enabling technology that allows for a particular form of mobility that embodies speed and comfort. It is of course difficult – if not impossible – to articulate the difference between private flying and conventional forms of flying in terms of their felt and sensed experiences unless one completes ethnographic or ethnomethodological research focused on the embodied practices of flying (perhaps following the model provided by Laurier, 2001, in his work on travelling salespeople). Yet even in the absence of such detailed non-representational work it becomes clear that the demand and supply of private business travel is hard to comprehend unless one pushes existing analyses beyond the economic realm into one where the economy is always and already thoroughly enculturated and embodied.

Challenges of growth: contesting personal aeromobilities

Given the seemingly increasing desire for speed and comfort among a kinetic elite, the rise in private aviation is explicable yet in some senses unpredicted, unregulated and unmanageable. Indeed, although business aviation only represents a small proportion of total air traffic, the predicted increase in flights is likely to have serious socio-environmental and operational implications (Learmouth, 2008). In Europe alone, the volume of business aviation traffic is growing at over twice the rate of all other air traffic (Marsh and Hammouda, 2008). The number of business aviation flights in European airspace reached almost 750,000 in 2007 (up 10% on 2006 figures), and during that year the sector as a whole contributed nearly €20bn to the European economy (Sarsfield, 2008)

Some business airports, including London’s heliport at Battersea, have had to

introduce slot restrictions to regulate and limit the flow of traffic, while others have submitted planning applications to expand their facilities. Unsurprisingly, most expansion plans have been met with vociferous local opposition with local residents opposing any development and the inevitable increase in flights, noise, and pollution, it would cause. Already, communities living near the UK's major business aviation airports and heliports have complained about the noise and pollution business aircraft produce and are opposing plans for expansion, while residents in St Tropez on the French Riviera are calling for restrictions on the number of helicopter flights that are allowed to buzz overhead (Pulford, 2004; Davies, 2008).

In addition to local noise issues, concern about the global environmental effect of aircraft pollution has risen in recent years, and a range of policy measures, from emissions trading schemes to taxes on aviation fuel, have been proposed as a means of reducing pollution. According to some reports, commercial aviation represents the fastest-growing source of CO_2 emissions of any industrial sector and 'frivolous' or 'binge' flying has become the *bête-noire* of the environmental movement (Pulford, 2004; Monbiot, 2006). At the time of writing, small business aircraft (those under 5,700kg), will be exempt from the European Emissions Trading Scheme, a programme that is designed to make air operators pay for the environmental pollution they cause (Webster and Watson, 2006) and this may have the unintended consequence of making private flight a more attractive financial proposition than first or business class travel on conventional airlines.

In recent years, members of the transnational class have been under attack for their ecologically unsustainable practices of travel and tourism (Veevers, 200; Osley, 2008). Though the evidence is largely anecdotal, it would appear that many users of business jets are largely unconvinced about the environmental implications of their personal mobility: "the engines [on my private aircraft] are more fuel efficient than on big airliners. I don't think they are as environmentally damaging" (cited in Brown, 2006: 18). Moreover, it has been suggested that business aircraft have become part of the 'corporate capture' of sustainability discourses in which private flying becomes

‘sustainable travel’, with many companies viewing private flying as more time-efficient and therefore less wasteful than scheduled airlines (McVeigh, 2008).

In addition to these socio-environmental concerns, the growth of business aviation is presenting a number of operational and safety challenges. Business aircraft are often slower than commercial aircraft, cut across major traffic flows, cruise at higher altitudes, and require enhanced air traffic control separation that ‘wastes’ valuable airspace (Clark, 2006). Concern has also been raised about the levels of training, supervision, and insurance of new pilots, as well as the wisdom of allowing business aircraft to share airspace with commercial flights (Matthews, 2008). In September 2006, an Embraer Legacy business jet and a Gol airlines Boeing 737 collided over the Amazonian rainforest killing all 154 people on the commercial airliner, while in 2008 a Cessna Citation business jet crashed into a house near London’s Biggin Hill airfield killing all the occupants (Barney, 2008: Webster, 2008). These, and other tragic incidents, have cited as evidence of the danger of escalating volumes of business traffic.

In this light, the recent entry into service of a new category of Very Light Jets (VLJs) may well exacerbate such problems. The unique operating performance of VLJs (which includes their speed and their ability to operate from airports with short runways and limited ground handling facilities) will mean that business travellers can access an even wider range of airports. The manufacturers of new VLJ models, such as the Cessna Mustang and the Eclipse 500, claim they will be much cheaper to purchase and operate than existing aircraft and over 2500 VLJs have been ordered to date, many by new start-up air taxi companies (Bowes, 2006; O’Connell, 2008; Sarsfield, 2008). While proponents claim VLJs will herald a new era of increasingly affordable and accessible private air travel that will enable another layer of people to use private jets (Bowes, 2006; Woods, 2006), critics fear VLJs will ‘clutter the skies, attract dangerous owner-fliers and degrade the swank-value of private flight’ (Brown, 2006: 18).

Conclusion

Air travel has been seen as a major enabler – and beneficiary – of the demand for international business travel. However, there is little question that the rapid growth in passenger numbers during the late twentieth century and the new techniques of passenger screening that have been introduced to combat terrorist threats have caused conventional air travel to become an increasingly overcrowded, stressful and unpleasant experience. The architectural and procedural shortcomings of certain passenger airports have been the subject of much debate, and airline executives, business leaders, and Government officials have cautioned that many major airports are no longer 'fit for purpose' and may actively be discouraging passengers from travelling (Calder, 2007; Milmo and Hickman, 2007). In this chapter we have suggested that those business travellers that can afford to are increasingly choosing to by-pass lengthy security and immigration queues and avoid congested hubs by chartering or buying their own aircraft and flying between smaller, less crowded airports (Clark, 2006), marking out their own social status in the process as part of an exclusive kinetic elite that does not want to or have to travels with the masses. To meet this burgeoning demand for comfortable and convenient privatised travel, a range of new ownership, and chartering solutions are emerging, effectively bringing many small, previously underused airfields into the global space of business flows.

Accordingly, we have attempted to show that whereas business aircraft used to be seen as symbol of success, now they are increasingly considered *a path* to success in the business world. Within a fragmenting airline industry, private air travel has accordingly emerged as a significant sector whose growth is a result of a complex and interlocking series of supply and demand factors that combine to make flying by private aircraft, for those who can afford it, a financially viable, convenient and comfortable alternative to premium-class airline travel. Tacking between the scales of the body and the global, this chapter has hence offered explanations for the rise of private business air travel. However, many questions remain about the spatial imprints of business aviation and its long-term implications for patterns and practices of business

travel. Additionally, the ways in which private aviation shields flyers from the need to deal with social Others – effectively creating secessionary spaces of mobility requires further investigation given this mirrors wider tendencies for the elites to try to escape the 'gravity' of democratic social relationships and public space (Atkinson and Flint, 2004). Uncovering further details of the global flows of private aviation will no doubt prove difficult, but without consideration of this sector, our understanding of global aeromobilities will remain emaciated indeed.

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