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## **Capitalism and collective action in the work of John Urry (I)**

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Auteur(s) (texte brut)

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Chapô

British sociologist John Urry is recognized as one of the most authoritative voices arguing for a ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences. Books such as *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000), *Mobilities* (2007) and *Mobile Lives* (2010) are regarded as milestones in the development of the mobilities turn and widely cited in many fields. However, important aspects of his work on mobilities were prefigured earlier in discussions about collective action and the restructuring of capitalism. This and the next entry of *Café Braudel* offer insights into this overlooked area of Urry’s work so as to broaden our understanding of his thinking on mobile lives and mobility futures.

Présentation longue

### **A life-long concern with space and social relations**

Although Urry has spent his life at a single institution, his thinking has been ‘on the move’ namely in relation to changes in the world, shifting academic debates and also colleagues at Lancaster with whom he has collaborated such as Scott Lash, Phil Macnaughten, Elizabeth Shove, John Law, Bob Jessop and Kevin Hetherington, to name but a few. At a time when academic careers are increasingly made through ever-deeper specialization on single research topics and the construction of a ‘brand name’ around such issues, the evolution of Urry’s interests may at first glance seem erratic: revolution, power, capitalism, regionalism, ‘restructuring’, place, tourism, environmental sociology, globalization, complexity theory, climate change, the body, mobility, finance, oil.

Urry's work offers many different readings and one may find multiple links between these varied topics. However, the relation between space and social relations emerges as a vital concern running through his forty-year career:

For many years I have been fascinated by what one could describe as the sociology of place. This developed out of a concern with how people actually experience social relations, both those which are relatively immediate and those which are much more distant, and how these intersect. (Urry 1995: 1)

[...] sociology (apart from its urban specialism) has tended to pay insufficient and ineffective attention to the fact that social practices are spatially patterned, and that these patterns substantially affect these very social practices. (Urry 1995: 64)

Writing about the dominant sense of the social presumed by sociology, he notes:

Societies were typically viewed as endogenous, as having their own social structures which were neither temporal nor spatial. Furthermore, societies were viewed as separate from each other and most of the processes of normative consensus, structural conflict or strategic conduct were conceptualized as internal to each society, whose boundaries were coterminous with the nation-state. (Urry 1995: 3)

Space (and time) are now key concerns in sociology, but, as the quotes above indicate, this has not been the case for much of the twentieth century. In the UK it was namely in the 1980s when the so-called 'spatial turn' in the social sciences gained prominence partly facilitated by a number of intellectual innovations, partly encouraged by wider developments in the world. In *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, a co-edited book published in 1985 bringing together prominent human geographers and sociologists such as Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Anthony Giddens, Edward Soja and Nigel Thrift, the human geographer Derek Gregory and John Urry refer to such wider developments:

the emergence of new spatial structures of combined and uneven development, particularly through the internationalization of production

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argument part rests on the time of appearance and size of the service class -hence much of our discussion is devoted to the American case- and in large part rests on the differing balance in the various countries of private-sector versus public-sector fractions of the class (1987: 10-11).

In this analysis a prominent role is granted, first, to the effects of economic change on the occupational structure (rise of the 'service class' and decline of working-class jobs and working-class mentality), and second, to the effects of the spatial scattering of the labour force on their organizational capacity in explaining the disorganization of civil society.

The organization of civil society is an issue that mobilities research has overlooked but which remains of special concern for Urry. For example, at the very end of his *Sociology beyond Societies* he notes the close links between mobilities as a research agenda and the growth of a global civil society:

[...] on that mediated public stage, many social groupings are appearing, developing partially, imperfectly and contingently, a kind of globalizing civil society. [...]

And it is this set of social transformations that constitutes the social base for the sociology of mobilities that I have elaborated in this book. It is to be hoped that the social basis of a 'global civil society', and of its resulting 'sociology of mobilities', will come to occupy powerful places in the scapes and flows that are re-constituting the complex emergent global domains emerging in the twenty-first century. (Urry 2000: 211)

This centrality of civil society is again evident in Urry's most recent analyses of oil and low-carbon futures. In *Societies Beyond Oil: Oil Dregs and Social Futures*, he places his hopes for a civilized, liveable future in 'the wide array of groups and organizations experimenting conceptually and practically with very many post-carbon alternatives' (2013: 237). Urry observes that

This emergent 'low-carbon civil society' is made up of tens of thousands of experiments, groups, networks, prototypes, laboratories, scientists, universities, designers and activities. Many involve making new connections between post-carbon practices developing around the world, partly through



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new digital worlds, including the vast App economy. This low-carbon civil society is developing preparedness for changes to come and trying to limit current processes, so making eventual outcomes less dire. This civil society is helping to realize preparedness and precaution in a world of ignorance and uncertainty as to what will or could or should work. (Urry 2013: 237)

If *The End of Organized Capitalism* presented a rather bleak prospect for collective action, and *Economies of Signs and Space*, like a few other texts on globalization published from the early 1990s (see Appadurai 1990), was (at least slightly) less pessimistic partly due to the potential attributed to new communication and transport networks to nurture a cosmopolitan civil society, his more recent work seems again less optimistic. In *Societies Beyond Oil* Urry wonders whether this emerging 'low carbon civil society' could gain sufficient strength to successfully face the immense powers of carbon and finance capital to prevent a change towards low-carbon societies and economies.

Those powers [finance and carbon capital] are on such a scale and developing with such tremendous forward momentum that there are no sorcerers around able to understand or deal with the powers unleashed by finance. And there are certainly not up to doing so in time and on a sufficient scale worldwide. So other bleaker futures are likely given this dictatorship of global finance, which played such a dark role in [...] the Great Financial Crisis. (Urry 2013: 238-9)

This entry has examined Urry's concern with space and social relations. It has introduced *The End of Organized Capitalism* and noted how collective action has been and continues to be a constant in his work. The next entry of Café Braudel will continue the discussion of Urry's work by focusing on *Economies of Signs and Space*, a book that expands the analyses initiated with *The End of Organized Capitalism* but which also signals a significant break in the study of the social.

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