

## 1. Dictionary

# John Urry (sociologist)

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)  
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British sociologist John Urry (1946-2016) was Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University and co-founder and director of the Centre for Mobilities Research from 2004 to 2015. Since the mid 1990s he advocated a shift in the focus of sociology from the study of a-spatial social structures to the study of mobilities. This approach was developed in books such as *Sociology Beyond Societies* and *Mobilities*.

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## Mobility in Urry's work

Urry's approach to mobility stemmed from a lifelong concern with the relationship between space and society. 'Social practices', Urry consistently argued, 'are spatially patterned, and these patterns substantially affect these very social practices' (1995, p. 64). This spatial sensitivity can be traced from his early work in the 1970s where he examined how variations in space engender dissent and revolution, through to his interest on the movement of capital and employment in the 1980s, and the mobility of people in the early 1990s. Since the mid 1990s, his work on the mobility of people, objects, images, information and money has been directly related to debates around the positioning of sociology in relation to epochal transformations in the evolution of human societies. In *Economies of Signs and Space*, co-authored with Scott Lash, he argued that globalization processes have undermined the analytical power of sociology as a discipline and that it needs to shift its unit of analysis from 'society' as a container of social institutions to global flows and networks. This argument was further developed and systematically presented throughout the 2000s. His books *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000) and *Mobilities* (2007) constitute milestones in the development of the 'mobilities turn'. Both are major works of synthesis that lay out an analytical framework for studying social relations as constituted by what Urry called physical, virtual and imaginative mobilities. This approach, termed the 'new mobilities paradigm', places a special emphasis on socio-material worlds. In contemporary societies, Urry argued, causality and efficacy in social relations are increasingly decoupled from nearness due to new ways of inhabiting and interacting with technological worlds that stretch human reach. These assemblages or hybrids of people and machines are interconnected through time and space in myriad complex ways and evolve in a non-linear manner. In his latest work Urry examined the implications of climate change and energy scarcity on the evolution of such mobile hybrids and future forms of social life.

Throughout his prolific career a major intellectual influence was *The Communist Manifesto* written when Marx was, as Urry has put it himself, 'at the stunning age of 30'. Two other important influences were *Liquid Modernity* by Zygmunt Bauman and *The Information Age* by Manuel Castells. It is interesting to note that a sociologist who devoted so much attention to the social significance of mobility spent his working life in a single place, while other academics who are critical of the mobilities turn, such as Bryan Turner, have developed highly mobile careers.

## Select bibliography

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## **Mobility**

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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## **Movement**

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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## **Mobilities paradigm**

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

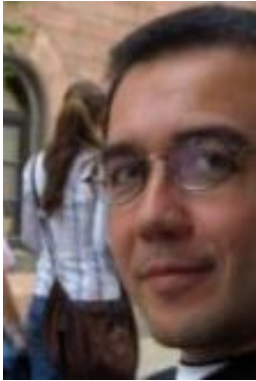
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Associated Thematics :

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Javier Caletrió is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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