

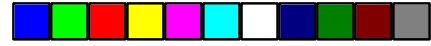
John Urry

# The concept of society and the future of sociology

**It is argued that sociology has devoted insufficient attention to reflecting upon the nature of 'society'. In trying to re-address this absence the author draws upon metaphors of regions, networks and fluids developed by Mol and Law to develop his analysis of 'society'. Investigation is provided of the nature of global networks and fluids and the ways in which such notions disrupt the conception of society as region. Particular attention is directed towards the characteristics of social fluids and this provides the basis for the author's attempt to elaborate a new agenda for sociology.**

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## Introduction

It is strange that sociology has devoted rather little attention to its central concept, that of society. When Margaret Thatcher famously declared that “there is no such thing as society”, sociologists led the critical charge to lampoon her claim. They declared that it is obvious that there is such a thing as society and Thatcher’s claim indicated the stunning inappropriateness of her policies based upon trying to reduce society to the interests of what she termed “individual men and women and their families”.

In this paper I shall not seek to install Thatcher as a major figure of methodological individualist social theory! But I shall suggest that the smug riposte to Thatcher on the part of especially the British sociological community was unjustified since it is unclear just what we do mean collectively by the term society. So although there is something ‘more’ in social life than “individual men and women and their families”, exactly what this ‘more’ amounts to is less than obvious. Most sociologists would not agree on the nature of this ‘moreness’. Elsewhere I have elaborated on at least eight different senses of the term ‘society’, each presumes a different sense of what is the emergent quality which produces at the level of the society something which is over and above “individual men and women and their families” (Urry 1995:41). It seems likely that there would be no agreement on *the* definition of society if we were to interrogate any random set of hundred sociologists!

So in this paper I shall suggest that if sociology has a central concept it is that of society, even if quite frequently alternative terms are used, such as country, social structure, nation or social formation. I shall go on though to consider whether indeed there is any

such ‘thing’ as society and if there is what it might be. But most importantly I shall ask whether the development of so-called globalisation does not call the obviousness of society into question as we move into the uncharted waters of the next century. What happens to sociology if its key concept, society, becomes inapplicable in the hugely uncertain future? I conclude with some brief suggestions for a transformed agenda for the future of sociology.

## Metaphors

This is obviously a large set of topics so I shall short-circuit many issues, particularly through my starting point. I begin with blood and the body and certain metaphors of the social that the investigation of blood reveals. I am indebted here to Mol and Law’s examination of ‘regions, networks and fluids’ in relationship to anaemia, to enable me to get to the heart of the issue of just what is society (1994).

They begin with a fascinating question. If someone suffers from anaemia where should we think of that anaemia being located? Where can it be found? The answer is that anaemia or thin blood is not anywhere in particular but is everywhere in the body. And this is because blood is everywhere. There are blood vessels throughout the body, forming an immense network enabling blood to reach every cell, and not just the larger bodily organs. And blood does not stay within the vessels which carry it since the white blood cells migrate through the walls of the blood vessels. Thus blood is characterised by a strange spatial pattern. It does not fit the structures or regions of conventional anatomy. It is a fluid moving through the extraordinarily complex networks of blood vessels in the human body and as a result literally gets every-



where in the body. It thus demonstrates a distinct topology.

Mol and Law then employ this discussion of blood to interrogate the diverse spatial forms of social life. What are the equivalent topologies of the social that their discussion of blood and anaemia suggest? They argue that there are three distinct social spaces or social topologies. First, there are *regions* in which objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each particular cluster. This topology of territorialisation is old, secure and familiar (see Lefebvre 1991). Second, there are *networks* in which distance is a function of the relations between the components comprising the network. The relations over distance within the network often crossing regional boundaries generates different spatialities. Third, there is the topology of the *fluid* which we encountered in the case of bodily blood. Mol and Law argue that with regard to fluids that flow:

neither boundaries nor relations mark the difference between one place and another. Instead, sometimes boundaries come and go, allow leakage or disappear altogether, while relations transform themselves without fracture. Sometimes, then, social space behaves like a fluid. (Mol and Law 1994:643).

Mol and Law utilise such a conception of a fluid space to describe the way in which anaemia is medically dealt with worldwide and especially the apparent differences between its monitoring and treatment in the Netherlands and in 'Africa'. They argue that there is no simple *regional* difference to be drawn between the forms of monitoring and treatment of anaemia in the Nether-

lands and that found in various African countries. Nor is there a single clinical *network* worldwide with elements that hang together through invariant relations, which transport what would seem to be the same 'anaemia' to both the Netherlands and 'Africa' (Mol and Law 1994:658). Rather they argue that:

We're looking at *variation without boundaries and transformation without discontinuity*. We're looking at flows. The space with which we are dealing is *fluid*. (Mol and Law 1994:658; emphasis in original).

'Anaemia' then, like blood, is seen as flowing in and out of different regions, across different borders, using diverse networks. It changes as it goes, but often imperceptibly. It is like a fluid, like blood, which is subject to invariant transformation as it is everywhere. Fluids are subject to mixtures and gradients with no necessarily clear boundaries. The objects generated may not be clearly defined. Normality is a gradient not a clear absolute. In a fluid space it is not possible to determine identities nice and neatly, once and for all; nor to distinguish inside from outside. Nor is this like a Wittgensteinian family resemblance since the components to be combined may not be randomly combined with each other. Other fluids may or may not combine together. A "fluid world is a world of *mixtures*" (Mol and Law 1994:660). Fluids are not solid or stable or of course the only spatial types. Fluids can get around absences (such as a laboratory in an African war zone) and are contingent. In short, Mol and Law conclude:

The study of fluids, then, will be a study of the relations, repul-



sions and attractions which form a flow... So *how* does anaemia flow? How does it move between the Netherlands and Africa and back again?... It may flow in people's skills, or as part of the attribute of devices, or in the form of written words... And as it moves, it changes its shape and character. (Mol and Law 1994: 664).

I shall argue here that this analysis of the flows/fluids of anaemia provides an exceptionally useful metaphor for analysing more general 'social' processes. I take three points from Mol and Law's full-blooded discussion of fluids. First, sociology needs to address the contrasting topologies of the social, especially to develop as a first step the spatialities of region, network and fluid in contexts apart from health care treatment in developing societies. Does this set of topologies work in different contexts or should we seek to develop or refine other spatial topologies? If so, what might these be? How do they connect to the extensive debates on the borders of human geography/sociology which have much addressed the spatially varied forms of social practice?

Second, much of what happens in a 'society' is influenced by the flows or fluids, in Mol and Law's case of the skills, technologies, interventions and tacit knowledges, of those involved in the treatment of anaemia. The extent and power of such flows especially across societal borders raise serious questions about the power of what Mol and Law term 'regions', such as the Netherlands or Zimbabwe, to resist, especially since the fluid may take different forms as it gorges within, or trickles through, a particular region.

Third, what are the implications of

such topologies for our thinking about 'society'? I shall argue that the sociological concept of society is premised upon the notion of a region, namely that 'objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each particular cluster'. Thus there appears to be, say Zimbabwe society with its clustering of social institutions with a border around, Dutch society with its cluster and its borders and so on. I further develop the implications of this analysis in the following.

### **Society**

Within sociology a society is typically presumed to be a sovereign social entity with a state at its centre which organises the rights and duties of each societal member. Most major sets of social relationships are seen as flowing within the territorial boundaries of each society, which in Mol and Law's terms is a 'region'. The state possesses a monopoly of jurisdiction over the territory or region of the society. It has been presumed that economies, politics, culture, classes, gender and so on, are societally structured. In combination they constitute a clustering or what is normally conceptualised as a social structure. Such a social structure is conventionally taken to be both material and cultural. This social structure (of society as a region) is seen as organising and regulating the life-chances of each member of the society in question. Moreover, through their interdependence with each other, it is presumed that societies are constituted as self-regulating entities significantly defined by their differences from other societies. What I term the north Atlantic rim has been constituted as a system of such national societies, with clear boundaries that mark one society as a region off from the other (see Held 1995; Rose 1996).



Obviously empirical societies have varied in their degree of boundedness, and especially, as Touraine argues, in the degree to which culture and society have clustered together (1997).

Over the past two centuries the concept of society has been central to western notions of what it is to be a human being, especially a human possessing the rights and duties of citizenship. To be human has meant that one is unambiguously a member of a particular society. Historically and conceptually there has been a strong connection between the idea of humanness and that of membership of a society. Society is taken here to mean, not a general sense of civilisation, but as that ordered through a nation-state, with clear territorial and citizenship boundaries and a system of governance over *its* particular citizens. Conceptually and historically there has been an indivisible duality, of citizens and societies. Rose characterises this model of societal governance as: "Government from 'the social point of view'" (1996:328). He summarises how in the British context:

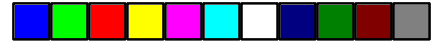
codifiers such as Beveridge and Marshall constructed a vision in which security against hardship, like hardship itself, was social and to be provided by measures of benefit and insurance that, in name at least, were to be termed 'universal', including all within a unified 'social citizenship'. (Rose 1996:345).

Such societal governmentality was effected through new forms of expertise, partly based upon sociology as the science of such societies and of the appropriate forms of citizenship to be developed (see Bulmer and Rees 1996, for recent material on Marshallian notions

of citizenship).

Furthermore, this notion of society as region implied a strong distinction between what was societal and cultural and what was beyond society as nature (whether or not that pre-social nature was viewed as Hobbesian or Lockean). And sociology as a specific academic practice developed out of the intense conflict between nature and society which reached its high point during the later nineteenth century within western Europe (see Macnaghten and Urry 1997: chap. 1). Nature was viewed as and degraded into a realm of unfreedom and hostility that needed to be subdued and controlled. Modernity involved the belief that human progress should be measured and evaluated in terms of the domination of nature, rather than through transforming the relationship between 'humans' and 'nature'. The development of sociology was the product then of a particular historical moment, of industrial capitalism in western Europe and north America. It took for granted the success of modern societies in their spectacular overcoming of nature. It concentrated and specialised on describing and explaining the character of particular modern societies. As such, sociology accepted and enhanced a presumed division of academic labour which stemmed from the Durkheimian desire to carve out a separate realm or region of the social which could be investigated and explained autonomously (Durkheim 1952; although obviously there have been some deviant sociologies which have transcended these formulations, arguing that agency or interaction or world system or culture is the key concept).

But my main point here is to interrogate how globalisation fractures this concept of society and hence problematises sociology's dominant discursive



framework. It does so partly by replacing one 'region', the bounded nation-state-society, with another, the global economy and culture. Touraine argues that there is an increasing separation of culture from society such that behaviour and motivation are no longer socially produced and reproduced (1997). But globalisation also entails the replacement of society as *region* with the global conceived of as both *network* and as *fluid* or flow. It is this postulated replacement of one social topology with these others which is the radical import of the supposed development of globalisation. I will now summarise some globalisation processes showing that they presuppose a social topology of either network or flow and not that of region (see Appadurai 1990; Brunn and Leinbach 1991; Gilroy 1993; Lash and Urry 1994; Waters 1995; Albrow 1996; Castells 1996, 1997; Cerny 1997; Eade 1997). It should be noted initially the exceptional growth in the writing on globalisation dating from around 1989, writing which has in various ways hinted at but not really developed the thesis about new social topologies.

### **Globalisation**

Most obviously the globalisation literature has described the wide variety of new *machines and technologies* which dramatically compress or shrink time-space. Globalisation entails infra structural developments routed literally or symbolically across societal borders. Such technologies include fibre-optic cables, jet planes, audiovisual transmissions, digital TV, computer networks including the Internet, satellites, credit cards, faxes, electronic point-of-sale terminals, portable phones, electronic stock exchanges, high speed trains and virtual reality. There are also large increases in nuclear, chemical and con-

ventional military technologies and weapons, as well as new waste products and health risks which are not simply caused within and treated within societies as 'regions'. These technologies carry people, information, money, images and risks. They flow within and across national societies in increasingly brief moments of time. In what Tom Peters calls the nanosecond nineties a set of technologies has grown up which generates new fluidities of astonishing speed and scale (1992). How should they be understood?

First, these developments do not derive directly from human intentions and actions - they are not separate from machines, texts, other technologies and so on (Michael 1996). There are thus no *social* structures as such. Further the kind of metaphor appropriate to capture these intersections of peoples and objects is that of the network or the fluid and not that of structure. The latter implies a centre, hierarchy and constitution (see Castells 1996:3). Network here does not mean social networks but involves complex and enduring connections between peoples and things (Murdoch 1995:745). Such networks spread across time and space, since according to Law: "left to their own devices *human actions and words do not spread very far at all*" (1994: 24). Different networks thus possess different reaches or abilities to bring home distant events, places or people, to overcome the friction of space within appropriate periods of time. Accountancy, for example, is particularly effective at reducing the variety of activities in distant regions to a common set of figures (the informational flow) that can be instantaneously translated back to other parts of the network and especially to its control and command headquarters (Murdoch 1995; and see Lash and Urry 1994, more generally on instantaneous time).



By contrast with the immutable mobiles of accountancy, the measurement of haemoglobin levels is different (Mol and Law 1994:647-650). Mol and Law ask how it is possible to produce regional maps of such comparative haemoglobin levels (which are analogous to accountants producing regional maps of the relative profitability of different plants of a global company). They argue that this requires a network constituted across many different regions, comprising appropriate technologies, measuring machines and people with suitable medical and technical skills. There are two points to emphasise here. First, such a network is problematic to establish because in parts of the world, such as poor African countries, there are inadequate numbers of machines to undertake the measurement of haemoglobin levels, and even where they do exist they may not be appropriately maintained. Thus Mol and Law talk of there being on occasions a “failing network”. Haemoglobin measurement is not immutable (see Latour 1990, on the power of the immutable mobile). As devices and techniques move from centre to periphery “their truths become progressively less reliable” (Mol and Law 1994:652). Second, where there is a successful network established across a number of regions this transforms space and time which is no longer to be seen as regional in its spatial configuration. In a network for measuring haemoglobin levels two hospitals can be close together even if they are hundreds of kilometres away from each other. Just as two hub airports are close together in the network of air travel, even if thousands of miles apart.

I now return back from blood to globalisation. Elsewhere I have discussed globalisation in terms of scapes and flows (Lash and Urry 1994). Machines

and technologies are to be seen as organised in terms of various *scapes*. These are the networks of machines, technologies, organisations, texts and actors along which the various flows can be relayed. An example of such a scape is the network of hub airports just mentioned which structure the global flows of the 500 million or so international travellers each year. Once particular scapes have been established, then individuals and especially corporations within each society will mostly endeavour to become connected to them, such as developing a hub airport, being plugged into the Internet, attracting satellite broadcasting and even reprocessing nuclear waste products. Along some scapes extraordinary amounts of information flow, of financial, economic, scientific and news data, into which some groups are extremely well plugged-in, while others are effectively excluded, creating inequalities of flow as opposed to inequalities of stasis.

The *flows* consist of people, images, information, money and waste, that are moved within and especially across national borders and which individual societies are often unable or unwilling to control directly. These flows create new inequalities of access/non-access which do not map onto the jurisdictions of particular societies (see the new journal *Space as Culture* 1997: Vol 1, Part 1, for a Deleuzian edition on Flow).

Certain of these scapes have become partially organised at the global level. Organisations responsible for facilitating the globalisation of scapes include the UN, the World Bank, Microsoft, CNN, Greenpeace, EU, News International, the Oscar ceremony, the World Intellectual Property Organization, UNESCO, the ILO, the Olympic movement, Friends of the Earth, Nobel Prizes, Bandaid, the Brundtland Report,



the Rio Earth Summit, the European Court of Human Rights, British Council and the English language, and so on. These employ most of the machines and technologies which facilitate time-space compression.

These scapes generate for late twentieth century 'humans', new opportunities and *desires*, as well as new *risks*. The former include cheap overseas travel; forming internationalised 'new sociations' especially via the Internet; obtaining consumer goods and life-styles of 'the other'; employing global imagery; participating in global cultural events; listening to 'world music' and so on. The latter includes AIDS, Chernobyl, cultural homogenization, the loss of economic national sovereignty, migration, being exiled and asylum seeking. These 'global' scapes and flows can result in the hollowing out of existing societies, especially as a plethora of 'sociations' have developed, concerned to reflect upon, to argue against, to retreat from, to provide alternatives to, to campaign for, these various scapes and flows, often going within and beyond the societal 'region'.

This generates within any existing 'society', a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, of off-centredness, as these multiple flows are chronically combined and recombined across times and spaces often unrelated to the regions of existing societies, often following a kind of hyper textual patterning. Notions of mobility and flow are seen as constitutive of identity which is less societal and more defined in terms of consuming elements of one or more of the putatively global scapes, so forming or reinforcing new networks.

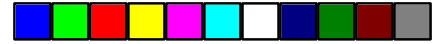
These widespread flows across societal borders makes it less easy for states to mobilise clearly separate and coherent *nations* in pursuit of goals based

upon society as region. This can be seen both economically and culturally. On the former, the breaking down of the coherence of 'national economies' has been combined with an increased political unwillingness of many states to tax and spend, let alone to nationalise industries so as to bring them under societal control. As a consequence of these scapes and flows, states have increasingly shifted to a regulative rather than a direct production/employment function, a shift in turn facilitated by new forms of information gathering, storage and retrieval. The EU is the quintessential regulatory state which *contra* Weber does not possess the monopoly of the means of physical coercion (see for example Ward 1996, on the European Bathing Waters Directive; and Walby 1997, more generally on the EU as a new regulatory state).

On the latter, the hybridisation of cultures, the global refugee problem, the importance of travelling cultures, some growth of a global dwellingness, diasporas and other notions of the 'unhomely', all problematise the notion of a society as region, which is somehow in and of itself able to mobilise for action. These configurations weaken the power of the societal to draw together its citizens as one, to govern in its unique name, to endow all with national identity and to speak with a single voice of the nation-state. As Rose argues while

our political, professional, moral and cultural authorities still speak happily of 'society', the very meaning and ethical salience of this term is under question as 'society' is perceived as dissociated into a variety of ethical and cultural communities with incompatible allegiances and incommensurable





obligations. (Rose 1996:353).

Thus we do not so much inhabit a risk society with its implied fixities of a 'regional' institution and social structure, but rather an indeterminant, ambivalent and semiotic risk culture where the risks are in part generated by the declining powers of societies in the face of 'inhuman' global flows and multiple networks (Lash 1995).

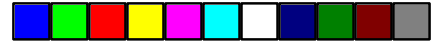
### Networks and Flows

I have so far described rather generally of global scapes, networks and flows which criss-cross the regional borders of society, thus bringing out some aspects of supposed 'de-territorialisation' of contemporary social life (see Lefebvre 1991:346-348, on the worldwide 'de-territorialised' banking system). I will now try to make these notions rather more precise, bearing in mind the discussion of blood and anaemia encountered above. It is necessary to distinguish between global *networks* and global *fluids*. The former are involved in numerous 'global' enterprises, including American Express, Macdonalds, Coca Cola, Disney, Sony, BA and so on (see Ritzer 1992; 1995; 1997). In each case there is a network of immutable mobiles which ensure that in every country in which the enterprise exists there is a predictable network of technologies, skills, texts, brands and so on which deliver more or less the same quality of product. They do not deliver exactly the same products (no pig served in Macdonalds in Muslim countries for example) but a similar set of products in a predictable, routinised and standardised environment, even where as is common there is not necessarily common ownership. These are powerful networks with few 'failings' which I discussed in the case of some African

testing of haemoglobin levels. An African Macdonalds will be every bit as 'good' as an American Macdonalds! Such networks depend upon allocating a very large proportion of resources to branding, advertising, quality control, staff training and the internalisation of the corporate image and brand, all of which cross societal boundaries in standardised patterns and sustain the network. Distance is measured in terms of the time taken to get to the next Macdonalds, Disney park, BA hub airport and so on.

In much of the earlier globalisation literature attention was directed to these global networks and their homogenising consequences (the 'cocacolonisation' thesis). However, more recent attention has been directed to what can be termed global fluids, comprising peoples, information, money, images and risks, that flow along various scapes. And the task for sociology into the next century will be to interrogate the conceptual and empirical natures of such 'fluids', as people, information, money, images and risks flow across regions in strikingly faster and unpredictable shapes. The emphasis of such a sociology would be the modes of movement or mobility - perhaps following Kierkegaard's: "Look only at the movements" (cited Shields 1997:1). Such social fluids possess a number of characteristics (see Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Gordon 1980; Lefebvre 1991; Mol and Law 1994; Brunn and Leinbach 1991; MacCannell 1992; Augé 1995; Shields 1997):

- They demonstrate no clear point of departure or arrival, just movement or mobility.
- They are channelled along particular territorial scapes or route-ways which wall them in.



- Such fluids are relational in that they productively effect relations between the spatially varying features of a scape which would otherwise remain functionless.
- They move in particular directions at certain speeds but with no necessary end-state or purpose.
- They possess different properties of viscosity and as with blood can be thicker or thinner and hence move in different shapes at different speeds.
- They move according to certain rhythms over each minute, day, week, year and so on.
- They do not always keep within the walls - they may move outside or escape like white blood corpuscles through the 'wall' of the scape into tinier and tinier capillaries.
- Power is diffused through these various fluids into very many often minute capillary-like relations of domination/subordination.
- Power is exercised through the intersection of various fluids working on diverse senses, including paradigmatically Foucault's 'inspecting gaze'.
- Different scapes and hence different fluids spatially intersect in the 'empty meeting grounds' of the non-places of modernity such as international airports, motorway service stations, the Internet, international hotels, cable television, expense account restaurants and so on.

### Conclusion

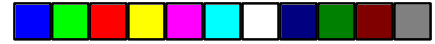
In conclusion I draw out some implications of the analysis of social fluids for the discursive practice known as sociology. At one level the weakening of a regional conception of society and associated notions of social citizenship could also mean the end of sociology;

Touraine (1997) talks of the framework of classical sociology collapsing as society decomposes. This has after all been the discipline which has, according to Rose: "ratified the existence of this [social] territory"; as that territory is transformed through the emerging power of these new topologies, so sociology is "undergoing a crisis of identity" (Rose 1996:328).

However, sociology may just be able to remake itself because in certain senses it is well-placed to benefit from and to participate within a world of global networks and flows. Its advantages are a relative lack of hierarchy, its somewhat unpoliced and distributed character, its inability to resist intellectual invasions, its awareness that all domains of inquiry do contain a social component, its potential to identify the social powers of objects and nature, and its increasing sophistication as to the spatial and temporal bases of social practice. While all of these render wreck havoc with any remaining notion of social reality *tout court*, sociology may develop a new agenda, an agenda of mobility.

And there is here an irony. Much twentieth century sociology has been based upon the study of occupational, income, educational and *social mobility*. In some sense British sociology has presumed that the differential rates of upward and downward mobility, within generations and across generations, is the defining question of the sociological enterprise. One might say that sociology has always regarded mobility as its core domain but there are various breaks that I am here advocating with this twentieth century vision of sociology based upon social/societal mobility.

First, mobility is to be regarded as a geographical as well as a social phenomenon. Much of the social mobility literature took society as a uniform sur-



face and failed to register the intersections of region, city and place, with class, gender and ethnicity. Further, we should be concerned with the flows of people within but especially beyond the territory of each society, and how these flows may relate to many different desires, for work, housing, leisure, religion, family relationships, criminal gain, asylum seeking and so on. Moreover, not only people are mobile but so too are many 'objects', as a consequence of diverse global networks and fluid-like flows. Mobility is thus predominantly horizontal rather than vertical.

Thus the agenda for sociology as it struggles into the next century will include analysing:

- The increasing interdependencies of 'domestic' and 'foreign' issues and the reduced significance of the means of physical coercion to the determination of states and their functions (Cooper 1996).
  - The changing character of citizenship as rights and duties are increasingly owed to and derived from entities whose topologies criss-cross those of societies as regions.
  - The increased mediatisation of social life and especially of the shift from a public sphere to a public stage as images circulate increasingly fast and with added reach.
  - The analysis of diasporas and other forms of belongingness which rest upon sustained forms of travel, the exchange of presents, photographs, images, information and so on.
  - The respective and uneven reach of diverse networks and flows, considered both conceptually and empirically, and the ways in which they spatially and temporally intersect.
- The extent, range and diverse effects of the real or imagined mobilities of people, for work, leisure, to escape torture, to sustain diasporas and so on; and to the degree to which this generates new forms of a cosmopolitan civil society beyond societal boundaries.
  - The diverse ways in which social groups respond to risks and to how these feed into diverse contested natures.
  - The many ways that objects are central to contemporary social life; indeed that actions stem from the mutual intersections of people and objects. Objects are constituted through mobilities, are themselves mobile, and enter in diverse ways into processes of personal mobility.
  - Changes within states towards an emphasis upon 'regulating' these mobilities, especially the mobilities of peoples and monies which affect tax-raising powers, and of information which enables performance indicators to be implemented and monitored across extensive geographical areas.
  - The social implications of these different networks and flows especially bringing out just how different classes, status groups, genders, ethnicities and so on are positioned with regard to such immensely powerful mobilities. Social inequalities are increasingly spatial and temporal as a result of the inequalities of flow.

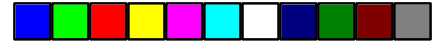
This is a brave agenda for a discipline which has apparently lost its central concept, that of 'society'. But maybe all this is in fact old hat. After all Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1974 (more or less a quarter of a century ago) that commodities:

constitute relatively determinate networks or chains of exchange within a space. The world of commodities would have no 'reality' without such moorings or points of insertion, or without their existing as an ensemble [of stores, warehouses, ships, trains and trucks and the routes used]. (Lefebvre 1991:403).

[And yet] The initial basis or foundation of social space is nature.... Upon this basis are superimposed - in ways that transform, supplant or even threaten to destroy it - successive stratified and tangled networks which, though material in form, nevertheless have an existence beyond their materiality: Paths, roads, railways, telephone links, and so on. (Lefebvre 1991:402-403).

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