IN MEMORIAM

John Urry, 1946–2016

John Urry’s unexpected death on 18 March 2016 shocked his family, friends, and colleagues. He and I first formed a bond as postgraduate students in Cambridge University in 1967–1970, sharing supervisors and interests, interacting thereafter in the Conference of Socialist Economists as well as in sociology conclaves, and becoming colleagues again in 1990 when I was appointed to a chair in sociology in Lancaster University. Although we both worked in a department of sociology, neither of us can be regarded simply as a sociologist. For our department is known for its transdisciplinary interests and commitment to working across disciplines to better understand social issues. Topics such as tourism, travel, and mobilities illustrate this par excellence, and John was the driving force behind our colleagues’ interest in these matters.

John Urry was born on 1 June 1946. He was a student at Haberdashers’ Aske’s Boys’ School and then went to Cambridge University to study economics and politics at Christ’s College, where he was supervised by, among others, James Meade, an economist subsequently awarded a Nobel Prize. These were years when John Maynard Keynes’s work was still taken seriously in Cambridge, and where heterodox economics still had a place in political economy—sadly no longer the case. He earned a “double first” by achieving first-class honors in Parts I and II of the Cambridge Tripos exams. He then embarked on a PhD in the Faculty of Economics and Politics (at this stage, there was no Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge) on the topic of relative deprivation and revolution, supported by a research studentship from the United Kingdom’s Social Science Research Council. There was a lively postgraduate research culture in these years, illustrated by the King’s College Research Seminar on Revolution in which we both engaged. This was based on collaborative work among postgraduate students in history and social sciences together with faculty members and was a fore-
runner of the style of research that John brought to Lancaster in 1970 as a young lecturer in an innovative university and department committed to encouraging independent studies. Not everything was intellectual exchange and political lesson drawing, however. I have a particularly vivid and slightly guilty memory of Christmas 1970, when John and Patricia Urry visited my home on Boxing Day and he and I rediscovered our inner boy, playing with the Hornby model train set that I had purchased for my then five-year-old son. The two research students became boys again and took over the controls of the locomotives and signal box. This was an early sign of John’s interest in mobilities—and one that he seems to have retained for life!

Returning to academic themes, these were innocent years before Sir Keith Joseph, Mrs. Thatcher’s hawkish secretary of state for education and science, took umbrage at sociologists’ rubbing of his cyclical cultural deprivation theory of family poverty and promptly declared that sociology was not a science, successfully calling for the renaming of the Social Science Research Council as the Economic and Social Research Council. Years later, John served as national chair of the Professors and Heads of Sociology group (1989–1992) and was heavily involved in defending the social sciences against similar onslaughts. Likewise, in 1999, he helped found the UK’s National Academy of Academics, Learned Societies and Practitioners in the Social Sciences (since renamed the Academy of Social Sciences) and served on the academy’s council from 2006 to 2012.

In 1970, before completing his PhD, John began a lectureship in sociology at Lancaster. During forty-six years of unbroken service, he contributed much to the department’s strong, flexible, and transdisciplinary research culture, both through his own work and through network and institution building across the university. Since the heady days of expansion in the “white heat of the technological revolution” and the influence of left-wing thinking in the 1970s, universities have changed enormously and the demands placed on academics and scholars have increased hugely. Yet John always maintained his love of learning, his curiosity about social change, a self-evident intellectual pleasure in delving into new subjects and ways of thinking—whether it was power, social theory, space, time, localism and regionalism, disorganized capitalism, leisure and tourism, nature and the environment, mobilities, the complexities of global society, energy usage and climate change, urban design, the social implications of 3-D printing, and, most recently, present futures and future futures. Many of these inter-
ests converged in his efforts to establish Lancaster’s Institute for Social Futures, where he was the cofounding director, sharing this responsibility with Linda Whitehead, a specialist in the empirical study of religion, secularism, and culture.

Different obituarists and memorialists have cited different works by John Urry as their sources of inspiration. My own favorite is John’s rigorous and comprehensive *Social Theory as Science*, coauthored with Russell Keat, a philosopher colleague at Lancaster (1975, reissued in 2015). This consolidated his theoretical trajectory up to that point and, together with Roy Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* (also published in 1975), inspired my own work in the philosophy of social sciences. However, always interested in staying abreast with changing theoretical as well as substantive debates, John read widely and asked about their intellectual value-added, what new insights they might generate, what anomalies and novelties they disclosed, and where they might lead.

My personal preference aside, however, John’s most widely read and cited book is *The Tourist Gaze* (with three editions in 1992, 2002, and 2011, respectively). The first edition marked a visual turn inspired by Michel Foucault’s notion of the clinical gaze but extended this insightful approach into many different fields of inquiry, illustrating John’s transdisciplinary interests and capacities for synthesizing diverse theoretical and empirical insights. Indeed, each of its three editions shows deep interest in the most recent social scientific advances—whether these involved notions such as the gaze, performativity, difference, risk, and complexity; anticipations of concepts like the dispositif, embodiment, or haptics; concerns with actor-networks, automobilities, and peak oil; interests in digital photography; or the (dis)continuities between modernity and postmodernity and the question of alternative futures. Building on this influential work, John introduced a novel MA program in tourism and leisure and, from 2003 to 2015, served as director of Lancaster’s Centre for Mobilities Research.

As these examples indicate, John’s interests were wide-ranging, involved links with the natural and environmental sciences, and reflected the strong “transdisciplinary” approach with “postdisciplinary aspirations” that characterizes Lancaster’s sociology department. This was a key factor in his ability to mediate among disciplines, paradigms, and epistemic communities, engage with so many students and scholars in his undogmatic and democratic way, encourage them to pursue their own interests and projects, and
offer ideas and insights drawn from his massive intellectual capital, which was also renewed and expanded through these interactions.

There are many ways to become and remain a distinguished sociologist. John excelled at most of them. But he never pursued fame by deferring to power or sacrificing his intellectual integrity. He was reassuringly “local” in his loyalties and critical engagement, and always provided enthusiastic support to students and colleagues. Yet, continuing with Alvin Gouldner’s distinction between organizational identities, he was equally firmly “cosmopolitan,” with a global intellectual presence. His interests and projects spanned the natural and social worlds, and his influence spread globally through personal networks and timely interventions in emerging debates.

John was a “sociologists’ sociologist,” who knew and respected the craft but also aimed to develop it. He is celebrated for cutting-edge innovations as well as for his steadfast defense and promotion of the discipline against politicians’ onslaughts. But he was also a restless intellectual spirit—the antithesis of a professional career sociologist with a tightly focused substantive project embedded in a narrowly defined understanding of the discipline. His unlimited curiosity created a mobile life, linking diverse fields and energizing new research initiatives and policy debates. Indeed, John worked at the leading edge of theoretical, empirical, and applied fields in the social sciences, reflecting social trends and shaping innovative work on emerging fields and policy areas. It is astonishing how much he achieved, in his own writing, in collaborative work, in developing international networks, in research management, in negotiating the endless succession of audits, and in promoting the social sciences. Equally amazing was that he did all this without ever losing his laid-back, generous, approachable, and good-humored manner. He was a great colleague, and his influence will live on through the continuing work and debates of those he inspired.

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