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1

Introduction: Theorizing 'Undefined Society'

By settling for one or other interpretation, ambiguity is often reduced.

(Mary Douglas, 1996: 40)

The anthropological perspective informs us that quite regularly our experience does not confirm exactly to the classifications by which we order our environment. Anomalies are routinely absorbed into our cultural milieu by being ignored or condemned. A stable categorical system and legitimizing rituals of learning allow this to happen rather efficiently. In this sense, our cultural and social milieu work like a filter or alphabet through which we focus on things which are in accordance with our categorical system and filter out those which are not (Douglas, *ibid*: 37–41). The above claim is made with reference to the small routines of everyday life. However, it is a different story when a whole society or culture is experiencing a state of *ambiguity* and where social and cultural reality are open to two or more competing interpretations. We could imagine this as something of a meta-anomaly, which develops when the cognitive and symbolic frame of reference of a society that normally deals with discrepant experiences is itself dissolved and put into question. Often, and this still in line with the anthropologically informed argument pursued so far, such conceptual ambiguity reflects a state of disorder or transition in society or culture itself. Such a comparatively unstructured state of the in-between, where neither the old nor the new frames of reference work properly, has been described as *liminality* (Turner, 1969).

We experience this sense of liminality in our everyday experience of a world that is increasingly difficult for us to comprehend. How is it possible for human beings to catch influenza from birds? We have been forced to come to terms with this enigma owing to the global spread of 'HN51' or 'bird flu' and its potential to introduce a global pandemic of deadly proportions. This phenomenon highlights the prevalence of ecological fear in contemporary Western society, which can be interpreted as anxiety

about a social order that is 'out of order' or, to put it more gently, a social order in transition (Douglas, 1991: 230). Behind the prominence of ecological issues, there lies the uneasy awareness of 'a profound change in our cultural and social perceptions of the reality in which we live', including the end of linear and monocausal explanations (Melucci, 1996b: 58–59). We see this uneasiness in our perception of other areas of social life. Also linked to increasing ecological concerns are phenomena such as *Reclaim the Streets* that involve a challenge to the spatial and discursive domination of everyday culture by the motor car. But how do we define phenomena such as *Reclaim the Streets*? Is it an organization or an event, is it politics or fun, is it a political or a cultural form of expression? A clue to the answer to this question can be found in the spaces created by this form of action: an inner-city dual carriageway transformed into a Caribbean beach complete with sand, sound system and carefree partygoers is neither a dual carriageway nor a beach but a liminal space that defines the in-betweenness of this form of 'political' action. We also face this experience of liminality every time we visit the supermarket or shopping mall. The intensification of global capitalism has heightened the importance of shopping and consumption and increasingly transformed us into 'desiring machines' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) with unlimited appetites for the symbolic markers of identity and success. The resulting symbolic universe, however, transforms consumption into a totally idealist practice (Baudrillard, 1998) which makes the satisfaction of desire impossible. The result is a form of 'abstract happiness' in which what we desire is the 'idea' of consuming. In this context, while the 'dream' of a 'dream holiday' may generate feelings of ecstasy and longing, the arrival at our destination is likely to be accompanied by feelings of ambiguity, disappointment and unease as the rationalized and homogenized experience the holiday becomes palpable.

The introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) into the workplace has also created liminal spaces within the global economy. The Indian call centre worker serving clients in the USA or Europe inhabits a world of 'real virtuality' (Castells, 2000a) plugged in or connected into the global communications network, but disconnected from workplace colleagues and neighbourhood community in a timeless, spaceless world that nevertheless remains 'placed'. While these workers are relatively privileged in the context of Indian labour markets, they nonetheless experience work as a liminal space marked by alienation and cultural dissonance. This example highlights the way space itself has become increasingly liminal, particularly in the form of the 'global city'. Canary Wharf in the London Docklands highlights these tendencies. Canary Wharf exists at the confluence of a complex set of inclusions and exclusions, continuities and changes. Canary Wharf contains

the headquarters of multinational financial and media organizations and luxury and executive housing and hotel accommodation and as such constitutes an important hub in a shifting global network of money, media images and people. However, Canary Wharf is surrounded by the relics and detritus of the British Empire: the docks that established London as the imperial metropolis in the nineteenth century and the East End and, in particular, the borough of Tower Hamlets, that houses colonial migrants in varying degrees of relative and real poverty alongside the pretentious affluence of Canary Wharf. Our everyday experience of the global city reflects the liminality of its form: complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion; belonging and not-belonging; rootedness and uprootedness; and engagement and non-engagement. How can we explain these feelings and experiences of liminality? The examples highlighted above suggest that the explanation lies somewhere in the complex relationship between the spatial restructuring associated with globalization and the temporal re-ordering associated with the developmental narrative of modernity.

The drift between a society in transition and a conceptual unitary framework, which is in the process of dissolving, lies at the heart of the debate in contemporary sociology: a debate focused on the dynamics and direction of social change according to the logics of globalization and/or modernity. The sociological projects that have developed from these positions have generated comprehensive models of social change that attempt to isolate the logic underpinning the multiplicity of transitions in the contemporary world. However, therein lies a problem. Does a society at the beginning of a process of epochal change warrant or require an overall definition? If the anthropological observation outlined above is correct, that it is difficult for any society to live in a state of categorical ambiguity, then it must be even more difficult for contemporary society, with its thorough embeddedness in rationalized systems of knowledge, to live with this ambiguity. Consequently, there have been several attempts to remain within the overall conceptual framework of modernity whilst stretching the concept to its limits in order to explain novelty associated with epochal change. Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), for example, has developed the concepts of 'high' or 'late' modernity to highlight the development and intensification of institutional reflexivity across time and space. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has developed the concept of 'liquid' modernity in order to underline the rapid changes resulting from the 'melting powers' of contemporary modernity. But most emphatically, it is the theory of 'reflexive' or 'second modernity' developed by Ulrich Beck that explores the contemporary process of transition *from within* the context of modernity itself (Beck, 1992). Second modernity is a 'radicalized' modernity insofar as it becomes reflexive towards itself or, to be more precise, towards the unwanted side-effects of its own development (Beck et al., 1994). However, if the changes

envisaged within Western modernity are indeed so radical that 'the transition to a reflexive second modernity not only changes the social structure but also revolutionizes the very coordinates, categories and conception of change itself' (Beck et al., 2003: 2), then why not leave the conceptual framework of modernity altogether? If the meta-change towards 'second modernity' involves 'everything that defines first modern society' (Beck et al., *ibid*: 8), then it would seem somewhat problematic to analyse this fundamental transition within the conceptual legacy of modernity.

Consequently, there have been various attempts to analyse contemporary society within the narrative of globalization. Expressed in the form of its lowest common denominator, globalization implies a historical process by which the economic, political and cultural geographies of society are redrawn beyond the territoriality of the nation state. Axford (2000) differentiates between a 'weak' and a 'strong' version of the globalization model. The weak version is premised on the notion that globalization involves an increasing connectedness between places and people across distance and within the economic, political and cultural sub-spheres of society. This approach focuses on the historicity and novelty of the interdependencies generated by the world market and new technology. In many ways, this approach constitutes a further elaboration of modernization theory as globalization is often presented as a narrative plot that more or less continues the linear story of modernity. The most prominent examples here are Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson (1999) who in *Globalization in Question* focus on the issue of continuity and discontinuity within the economic sphere; Goran Therborn (1995) who presents the global arena as stage for competing *Routes to/through Modernity*; and Ulf Hannerz (1998) who presents *The Global Ecumene as a Landscape of Modernity*, effectively constructing a continuity between modernity and the intensified cultural interconnectivity of contemporary society.

The 'strong' version of globalization theory takes as its starting point the claim that the world has become a single place with its own systemic properties (Axford, *op cit*: 239; Robertson, 1992: 135). The analytical consequences of shifting the focus from 'globalization' to 'globality' have been developed most systematically by Martin Albrow (1996) in his conceptual model of the *Global Age*. Albrow argues that we have to leave the conceptual framework of modernity behind if we are to grasp the new configurations that underpin a new epoch of human society. The new material reference for both individual action and institutional structuring within this new configuration is 'globality' or the spatiality and finitude of the planet. In contrast to the 'weak' version of globalization theory, which presents global interconnectedness as a product of modernization, Albrow presents these as the necessary products of globality. Globality is a frame of reference in which the modern project is increasingly relativized and

contextualized, and hence the global shift is a process of transformation rather than the culmination of social change as manifested in a new institutional configuration beyond the nation state (Albrow, *ibid*: 100). The agenda for modern society is set by 'planetary globality' rather than the narrative and technological plot of modernity.

Contrasting the positions of Beck and Albrow as the most radical formulations of social change within the respective narratives of modernization and globalization, we are left with two contradictory but overlapping positions. While both positions are underpinned by the claim that an understanding of contemporary society has to go beyond the established categories of nation state sociology, one position continues within the time-oriented narrative project of modernity, while the contrary position seeks to frame contemporary social change through the spatial frame of 'globality'. We argue that both accounts fail to recognize sufficiently the essential ambiguity of contemporary social change and transition. The idea of a 'second modernity', no matter how radicalized, is a foregone conclusion in that it conceals the state of liminality we are experiencing through the construction of a conceptual continuity between first and second modernity. On the other hand, 'globality' opens up a new perspective that is sensitive to novelty and discontinuity, but in so doing serves to sideline important instances of continuity within radical processes of transition. It is not our intention to take sides in the global age/reflexive modernity debate. Instead, we observe that the debate reveals a constellation of blurred vision (*Unschärferelation*) between two theoretical approaches that are both premised on a 'totalizing viewpoint' (Lyon, 2000: 229–231).

So, where do we go from here? We are attracted to the observation of Melucci (1996a: 486), which suggests that it is awkward to pose new questions using old language as an alternative to the development of a new of paradigm. However, it has become increasingly obvious that a new paradigm, such as that provided by 'globalization', is unable to grapple with the complexity of contemporary patterns of continuity and change in a satisfactory way. In this context, maybe it is a good idea to avoid the temptation of imposing an overall definition on a process of transition that is only just beginning. Instead of slipping from one pair of old shoes that are worn out into a new pair that are a bit too tight, perhaps it is quite adequate to walk on bare feet for a while. Hence, Melucci argues that:

rather than denying this quandary or hiding behind words, it is preferable . . . to clearly state that we do not know what society we are talking about. We definitely do know, empirically, but our theories do not provide adequate tools to enable us to forge an overall interpretation. (Melucci, *op cit*: 486)

To take up this idea of an 'undefined society' (Melucci, *ibid*: 485) is not an alibi to refrain from conceptual work or to ignore the work done by others, especially the approaches mentioned so far. However, it does mean to take a step back from approaches that attempt to develop an overall definition of society and to recognize the complexity of social change that overall definitions tend to simplify or obscure. This reservation applies to both the theory of 'second modernity' and the uncritical use of the concept of globalization. Indeed, Roland Robertson, one of the founders of the globalization discourse, has called for caution against the uncritical use of the term; arguing for 'analytical strategies of *complexification*. . . before we engage in the task of simplification' (Robertson & Khondker, 1998: 27). Complementary to the claim for complexity is the request for empirically grounded analysis. We agree with Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2000: 60, 72), who advocates 'intentional and purposeful empiricism' for a sociology that effectively 'hovers between the known and the unknown'. Rather than subsuming change within the certainties provided by an old or new framework, we need to grasp the processes of transition that are at work in the concrete configurations of social, political and cultural practice. In this way, we can rediscover the complexity of overlapping, and perhaps contradictory, changes that are occurring in contemporary society.

What we develop in this book is an analysis based on a patchwork of 'thick descriptions' of transition, rather than an overall definition of contemporary society. This might imply an untheoretical approach insofar as we do not attempt to come up with a term that can challenge the formulae of epochal change implied by 'reflexive modernization' or the 'global age'. If we were pushed to define our own standpoint it would have to be that contemporary society can be defined as an 'age of transition' (cf. Wallerstein, 2000). However, our approach is certainly not theory-less; we make critical use of the concepts developed in the theories of reflexive modernization, transformation theory and theory of globalization. We believe that there are hotspots of transition where the complexity of change can be observed most vividly: the world or global city, East-Central European borderlands, the workplace, consumption, politics and the environment. The picture is by no means complete, but we believe to have picked those hotspots, which, based on empirical evidence, appear as important gravitational centres of change and which have become the focus of intense, cross-disciplinary, debate. In each case, we highlight the complex processes of continuity and disjuncture underpinning the rapid transformations in these hotspots of transition. Our aim is to highlight the complexity of social change and to highlight the ways in which processes of social change produce an aggregate of societal complexification. Indeed, what the approaches explored in this book share is a focus on the ways in which contemporary patterns of social changes are underpinned by the

operation of complex, non-linear, dynamic processes that possess emergent or vitalist properties (Urry, 2005). As Urry (*ibid*: 235–236) notes, the principal contemporary commentators of modernity and globalization at times articulate this complexity. The analysis of ‘second modernity’ is thus characterized as a driverless out-of-control juggernaut (Giddens, 1990) producing irreversible processes and unintended ‘boomerang effects’ (Beck & Willms, 2003) on a global scale. The non-linear nature of social change has been highlighted by commentators that focus on the intensification or relativization of temporal and spatial ordering. Hence, Harvey (1989) has described the process of ‘time–space compression’ by which temporal and spatial frames of reference have been radically rescaled by the effects of ICT and transportation technologies. Bauman (*op cit*) describes the contemporary state of modernity as ‘liquid’ as people, images, information and money flow with increasing intensity around the globe. The complex and dynamic nature of contemporary social change is also stressed by Castells (*op cit*) who highlights the ‘self-organizing’ and ‘non-hierarchical’ dynamics of the globalized ‘network society’. Finally, Appadurai (1990) describes the landscape of the global cultural economy as a ‘fluid, irregular shape’ with ‘fundamental disjunctures’ between economy, politics and culture. Our aim is thus to highlight the ways in which these processes of complexification underpin the dynamic patterns of social change in the ‘hotspots of transition’, which we will now briefly introduce.

In Chapter 2, we focus on the dynamic and changing forms of urbanism underpinning the global expansion of urbanization. The process of urbanization and the development of the modern metropolis were central to modern development and the cultural and aesthetic sensibilities of modernism. The expansion of the city underpinned the consolidation of state power, the growth and expansion of modern industry and the corresponding growth in mass consumption. The modern city in modern times became the ultimate centre of innovation and creativity and a melting pot of ethnic and cultural milieux. In the context of globalization and the crisis of ‘first’ modernity, the city has returned as a key focus of sociological enquiry. The processes of urbanization and industrialization that occurred in the Global North in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are now repeated in the developing countries of Asia and the Global South, but now on a far more intensive and expansive scale and often with rather different outcomes than those envisaged by the basic assumptions of modernization theory. In the Global North, the process of de-industrialization has resulted in the decline of many industrial cities while other cities have become increasingly detached from their national hinterlands and integrated into a new form of ‘networked capitalism’. The development of the ‘global city’ raises two fundamental questions that will be explored in this chapter. First, what are the main spatial configurations of globalized

urbanism and how is this different in developed and developing societies? Second, can these changes in the spatial and social organization of the city be grasped as a process of transition from modern metropolis to global city or are more complex theoretical tools required?

In Chapter 3, we focus on borders and border regions in order to highlight important changes in the geography of power and identity. The modern nation state comprised a unitary system of power with fixed territorial borders and a monopoly of legitimate violence (Weber, 1948). While there is a long-standing debate as to whether nationally defined communities were 'real' or 'illusory' (cf. Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1983), these communities undoubtedly contributed to the relatively stable and 'centred' identities of the modern era. The process of globalization has undermined these modern configurations of power and identity. In this context, a new geography of power and identity is emerging as territorially defined cultures, and spatially bounded communities become increasingly eroded and challenged by a socio-cultural logic of the 'in-between'. While this would apply to almost any border setting, the East-Central European region is of particular interest insofar as it has become the site of an intense and multi-layered transformation from post-socialism towards open society. This makes this particular region a kind of laboratory for researching the impact of the intersecting, and partly conflicting, dynamics of globalization, catching-up modernization and revitalized regionalism. These borderlands constitute a form of 'pilot-region' for the analysis of hybrid identities, cosmopolitan citizenship and multi-level governance. These developments raise a number of issues that form the analytical and conceptual focus of this chapter. First, what is the structural logic behind the inherent ambivalence of borders? Second, to the extent that state borders are becoming more porous, what are the main historical and geographical factors contributing to this ambiguity? Third, how are these historical and geographical specificities manifesting themselves in the new borderlands of Central-East Europe? Finally, can this setting serve as a seedbed of transnational cosmopolitan citizenship?

In Chapter 4, we explore the workplace in transition and the temporal and spatial reordering of labour in the global age. The modern workplace occupied a nodal position in the socio-economic and socio-cultural configuration of modern society. The labour market was the principal mechanism for the distribution of material and symbolic rewards and provided the basis for a stable set of inequalities and cleavages around the categories of class, gender and ethnicity. The workplace was also an important source of meaning, motivation and identity and an important component in the generation of workplace collective identity and neighbourhood community. This rested on a stable international division of labour in which workers in the developing world produced the raw

materials required by workers in the dynamic industrial economies of the developed world. During recent decades, a process of intense post-industrial restructuring has resulted in the flexibilization not just of the work process, but also of labour itself, with workers and managers increasingly becoming entrepreneurs of their own labour. At all levels a state of persistent precariousness has replaced once stable professional careers, and unemployment increasingly appears as personal failure in a process of self-management. These tendencies have been accentuated by the development and application of ICT. Firms and capital have become even more footloose and industrial processes and indeed whole industries have been reconfigured on a global scale. This suggests an orderly transition between a modern, industrial, 'Fordist' and spatially embedded workplace towards a postmodern, post-industrial, post-Fordist and 'networked' workplace. The reality, however, is more complex and, through an exploration of the global call centre industry, we highlight the main contours of a liminal workplace in transition. This process of transition raises a number of questions. First, how does the introduction of ICT affect the organizational design and labour process within networked TNCs and who are the winners and losers in this process? Second, to what extent have patterns of collective resistance been overcome in the contemporary workplace and to what extent have corporate attempts to re-engineer workplace identity and subjectivity been successful? Third, how do these changes influence gender relations within the workplace and to what extent does the increasing importance of emotional labour in the global service economy result in the feminization of the workplace?

In Chapter 5, we explore changes in the discourse and practice of consumption with a particular focus on the complex and ambiguous relationship between money and identity. The ambiguous nature of money was explored in the work of both Marx and Simmel who both emphasized, in somewhat different terms, the way in which money constitutes both ultimate freedom and ultimate domination and control. This tendency was intensified by the development of Fordism and a system of mass consumption underpinned by assembly line mass production and the development of marketing and advertising. The current phase of neo-liberal restructuring and the development of a globalized post-Fordist economy are widely regarded as having intensified consumer culture. The development of ICT, for example, has resulted in an intensification in the circulation of consumer images and signs to such a degree that social reality has imploded into a new form of hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1983a). The flexible and increasingly precarious nature of post-Fordist work has resulted in a situation in which consumption is *the* source of identity and meaning in the postmodern world (Bauman, 1992). However, there are also a number of accounts of postmodern consumption that highlight the

deeply alienating nature of the new 'means of consumption' (Ritzer, 2005) and the way in which these are underpinned by intense processes of monitoring, manipulation and control (Davis, 1998; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991). The world of consumption has not, therefore, been transformed as part of a straightforward shift from modernity to postmodernity. This raises a series of important questions. First, what are the origins of intensified or 'hyperconsumption' and how is this transforming the spatial and organizational form of contemporary consumption? Second, how are these changes affecting individual identity and autonomy in the context of the hyper-real spaces of contemporary consumption? Finally, how are these ambiguous and contradictory tendencies interwoven into the spatial fabric of the global city and how does this impact on culture and identity in these new socio-cultural spaces?

In Chapter 6, we explore the new individualities and solidarities that are developing based on the new forms of politics beyond and below the nation state. The modern age was an age of meta-ideologies: total ideologies (*weltanschauungen*) that defined past, present and future in terms of a linear trajectory towards a pre-defined utopia. In geo-political terms, the principle cleavage was between liberal democratic capitalism and authoritarian state socialism: manifested in a geo-political alignment around the USA and USSR, respectively. In this context, and in the context of the above geo-political cleavage, the dominant tendency in liberal societies was towards various forms of 'class compromise' and the development of the social democratic welfare state. The specific form of the welfare state varied markedly in different national contexts (Esping-Andersen, 1990), but overriding these differences was a commitment to social justice and egalitarian collectivism manifested in an extensive system of state planning, state ownership and social insurance. During the 1970s, commentators began to spot a range of contradictions and systemic failures within the welfare state that were undermining popular support for welfarism (Habermas, 1976; Offe, 1984, 1985a) and, during the 1980s, these internal contradictions were intensified by two powerful and related external dynamics: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the emergence of networked global capitalism. In this context, the nation state increasingly lacks both the capacity and the legitimacy to deliver welfare and this has resulted in an extensive programme of neo-liberal restructuring including the privatization and liberalization of industries and services and the promotion of individualist and entrepreneurial values. In a wider context of de-industrialization, this has resulted in the decline of the labour movement as a political actor, the increasing importance of new social movements (NSMs) and symbolic forms of political action and the crisis and recomposition of social democracy. While these developments could be presented as a straightforward transition from a collectivist form of modern politics to an individualist

form of postmodern politics, we would argue that this is simplistic and masks a complex pattern of continuity and change around the generation of both new individualities and new solidarities. In order to explore this complexity, we will focus on the following questions. First, how are global configurations of power being transformed by networked neo-liberal globalism and does this mark the end or the transformation of social democracy? Second, does the politics of NSMs go beyond individualistic forms of symbolic politics and if so what are the social and political implications of the resulting cleavages and solidarities? Third, to what extent are global forms of resistance emerging to challenge neo-liberal globalism, what forms does this resistance take and how successful has it been in challenging the neo-liberal agenda?

In Chapter 7, we explore life in risk society through an analysis of the relationship between nature, the environment and individual milieu. The dominant ideologies of modern societies were premised on anthropocentric or human-centred assumptions. Throughout the twentieth century, humanity clung to this 'arrogance of humanism' (Ehrenfeld, 1978) and the resulting naive view that the negative effects of growth and development could be controlled and neutralized by the 'technological fix' of further scientific development. However, the emergence of complex 'planetary risks' such as nuclear fallout and global warming, and the increasing perception that contemporary westernized lifestyles are not ecologically sustainable, has increasingly undermined the 'environmental' perspective of 'first modernity' (Beck, 1995). The ecology movement has played a key role in questioning and relativizing the assumptions underpinning the rational-scientific paradigm and the long-term unsustainability of current patterns of growth and development. Environmental problems highlight planetary interconnectedness and have provided the impetus for new types of social movement and forms of civic consciousness beyond the nation state. However, it has also become apparent that the environmental discourse can reproduce an important fallacy of modern society: the projection of fundamental crisis within society onto nature. If anything, global environmental problems point us towards a turning point in contemporary society where crucial foundations of modernity – such as the Cartesian World View, North/South exploitation, gender inequality and trust in science – are put into question. The relationships between nature, environment and individual life world are becoming increasingly complex and this raises a number of important questions. First, what is the precise relationship between perceptions of nature and existential uncertainty and how is this reflected in contemporary perceptions of risk? Second, how does the development of 'risk society' change the spatial and temporal ordering of modern society? Third, how are increasing perceptions of ecological risk linked to wider processes of social transformation and the dynamic

of reflexive modernization? Finally, how are perceptions of nature and environmental risk 'embodied' in the everyday life of milieu?

In the final and concluding chapter, we address the problem of the 'social' in a globalized and de-territorialized world. We explore how the processes of social, spatial and technological restructuring explored in this book render the traditional sociological focus on to face-to-face interaction increasingly problematic. Throughout this book, we highlight the corrosive effects of powerful disembedding mechanisms and the ways in which these are responsible for processes of de-traditionalization and individualization and an intensification of alienation and anomie. However, we reject the post-structuralist proposition that contemporary patterns of social change approximate to 'disembedding without re-embedding' or the 'end of the social'. We highlight the way in which the hotspots explored in this book are also sites of at least partial re-embedding and the way that the development and application of ICT provides the basis for new forms of social engagement, intimacy and trust. We explore the extent to which these new social forms can be conceptualized adequately through the sociological category of 'community'. We argue that in the context of time-space distancing, the concept of 'community' is ineluctably 'place-bound' and we explore the analytical potential of the alternative conceptualizations of 'neo-communities' (Lash & Urry, 1994), 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991) and 'socosphere' (Albrow, *op cit*). We argue that in a 'network society' (Castells, *op cit*) 'abstract systems' (Giddens, 1990) do not lead in an unproblematic way the 'colonisation of the life-world' (Habermas, 1987) but have an enabling and empowering function with regard to maintaining life worlds across time and space. This, however, is a complex process and generates ambiguity. We thus conclude with a re-amplification of our central argument regarding the liminal and in-between nature of contemporary societies in transition.

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