

Manuel castells' theory of network society



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Manuel Castells is a sociologist frequently associated with information society and communications research. In this essay I will be assessing his theory on “ the network society”, and outlining any relevant criticisms. By looking at Castells’ upbringing and influences it becomes clear how he came to be concerned with the theory of the network society. He was raised in Barcelona and was politically active in the student anti-Franco movement; this political activism forced him to flee Spain for France. He finished his studies in Paris and moved on to the University of Paris achieving a doctorate in sociology. Having worked at both the University of Paris and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, he later moved to California as he was awarded two professorships at Berkeley. Castells’ move to California was highly relevant as he was located close to Silicon Valley, which was where the integrated circuit, microprocessor, microcomputer and many other key technologies, were developed mainly in the 80s. It has been the site of electronic innovation for over four decades, sustained by about a quarter of a million information technology workers. Influenced by the thought of Alain Touraine, Castells was a key developer in a variety of Marxist urban sociology that emphasises the role of social movements in the conflictive transformation of the city. Transcending Marxist structures in the early 80s, he concentrated upon the role of new technologies in the restructuring of an economy. His theory of the network society is highly relevant to us as we all belong to thousands of networks, be it a school, a university, a nationality or an occupation, and all networks require some form of coordination.

According to Castells, networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies. He believes there is a radical disconnectedness in contemporary

society bringing about a greater sense of autonomy due to technology. Castells believes that “ we are passing from the industrial age into the information age” (Castells, 2000, 5). He talks of how this historical change was brought about by the advent of new information technologies particularly those for communication and biological purposes. He noted how space and time are being transcended in social practises due to the ability to do everything from everywhere thanks to the capacity for ubiquitous perpetual contact in communication technologies. “ A number of major social, technological, economic and cultural transformations came together to give rise to a new form of society” (Castells 2000, 17). Castells first mentioned the term “ network society” in his book “ The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture” which was the first part of his Information Age trilogy. He claimed, “ The definition in terms of a network society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. So it’s not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization, it’s about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies” (Castells, 1996, 34). Simply put a network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronic based information and communication technologies. While he explains that networks are not a new form of social organization, they have become a key feature of social morphology, essentially they are new forms of old processes. He claims this is largely due to communication technologies, for example the internet or mobile telephones, which increase decentralization of operations and focusing of control which in turn increase

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the effectiveness of networks relative to hierarchical structures. “

Communication networks are the patterns of contact that are created by flows of messages among communicators through time and space,” (Monge and Contractor, 2003, 39). “ The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture” gives an account of the economic and social dynamics of the new age of information. It demonstrates research done in USA, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Castells talks of how the global economy is now characterized by the instantaneous flow and exchange of information, capital and cultural communication. These flows order and condition both consumption and production. The networks themselves reflect and create distinctive cultures. Both they and the information they carry are largely outside of national regulation. This means that society’s dependence on these new modes of informational flow can give enormous power to those in a position to control them to control us, “ Networks have become the predominant organizational form of every domain of human activity” (Castells, 1996, 101).

To better understand Castells theory of a network society it is helpful to look back to his work of 1989, “ The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban Regional Process”. In this work he mentions the space of flows which plays a central role in his vision of the network society. Castells is an urban geographer, which is why his examination of space is central to his work. He describes the space of flows as a “ high-level cultural abstraction of space and time with dynamic interactions to the digital age society” (Castells, 1989, 23). He wanted to “ reconceptualise new forms of spatial arrangements under the new

technological paradigm” (Castells, 1989, 146). He believed this was relevant in that it could be viewed as a new type of space that allowed distant, simultaneous, real-time interaction, unlike anything that has been around previously. So the space of flows plays a central role in Castells’ vision of the network society, it is a network of communications, defined by hubs where these networks intersect. Societies are not attached to a specific place but instead to the space of flows. He argues that “ while organizations are located in places, the organizational logic is placeless, being fundamentally dependent on the space of flows that characterizes information networks” (Castells in NyÅri, 2004, 23). This space of flows tests what Castells talks of as the space of places, which includes regional communities and nation states. It can be seen that “ while the space of flows can be abstract in social, cultural, and historical terms, places are condensations of human history, culture and matter” (Castells, 1990, 14). In this way opposition to the space of flows of various networks manifests itself in the form of communities based around places. So while the space of flows consists of global circuits of information for example the internet, the space of places is dominated by decisions and has bounded territories or seemingly fixed localities. Barry Wellman draws on Castells ideas and believes technologies have shrunk everything; he talks of how communities have become global instead of local and are attached to technological not geographical links. Wellman says Castells observations have profound implications for what community means in contemporary society. Through these definitions Castells developed the notion of timeless time, which he saw as an index of social change. He believed time has become more complicated and sequences of life are becoming scrambled. Space and time are fundamental

experiences of social life but are being transcended in social practise, for example users of “ Skype” can speak to each other in any number of different countries at any one time and all communication is instant.

For Castells, networks have become the basic units of modern society and so the network society can be seen to be more than just the information society that was originally mentioned. Castells argues that it is not simply the technology that characterizes contemporary societies, but also cultural, economic and political aspects that when combined can create the network society, “ Influences such as religion, cultural upbringing, political organizations, and social status all shape the network society” (Castells, 1990, 86). Societies can be shaped by these aspects in a variety of ways. According to Castells, power now lies in various networks, “ the logic of the network is more powerful than the powers of the network” (Castells in Weber, 2002, 104). Many networks today, for example financial capital, have become global in scale. Networks can play a key role within businesses now, capital such as staff, consultants, and other businesses can be brought together to work on a specific project, and when it is finished they separate and are reallocated to a new task becoming connected to a new network. Although Castells is more concerned with the macro as opposed to the micro in society he admits it is important to assess the abilities of actors in the network whether it is a company, an individual, the government or any other organization. He determines participation in the network by the level to which the actor can contribute to the goals of that particular network. “ This new environment requires skilled flexible workers: the organization man gives way to the flexible woman” (Castells, 2000, 12). This creates a binary

process of inclusion and exclusion from these networks where by the individuals with little or nothing to offer their network, are excluded. An important aspect of the network society is the links between the networks of people. Isolated networks are weak and being connected is a type of power. Belonging to more than one network is always useful, however in the network society, because of the binary nature of exclusion, teamed with the fact that it is simpler to exclude, inclusion can be seen to give more power than it did previously. At the same time though electronic communication makes it much simpler to join a network, for example group emails or threads on social network sites, which can instead devalue inclusion.

Like most social theorists Castells has attracted various criticisms regarding aspects of his theory of the network society; for example his analysis of the role of information, production and the link between capitalism and informational labour. Many refute his claim that the present economic and social situation is a new age, but instead is simply an extension of industrial capitalism. Many feel there is a danger for Castells in focusing on the radical novelty of the post industrial society, and overlooking key continuities between it and past socio-economic formations. Dan Schiller argues that “ the main economic drive in network societies is still the desire to gather private capital; the market imperatives of competition and co modification still dominate, and the social and economic inequalities characteristic of market economies tend to widen rather than close” (Schiller, 2000, 48). Both academics and critics such as Mitchell Kapor, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation have attempted to read Castells work but have given up due to its extensive data collection and lack of synthesis, “ It may be

profound, but it is certainly opaque” (Kapor, Internet Galaxy, 2008).

Professor Martin Kenney, a member of the faculty of Applied Behavioural Sciences at UC Davis who has studied the Information Age trilogy says, “ When Castells does draw conclusions; they can be so aphoristic that their precise meaning can be elusive” (Kenney, Internet Galaxy, 2008).

Both Webster and Garnham have accused Castells of technological determinism. The theoretical problem Webster poses is the relative autonomy of the mode of development. The mode of development is spoken of as influencing social relations however isn't determined by capitalism and Castells says it can survive it, “ the new economy may well outlast the mode of production where it was born” (Castells, 2000, 11). Webster believes this implies that the mode of development continues on its own technological logic so “ in key respects, is beyond the reach of politics” (Webster, 2004, 17), and therefore feels in spite of Castells' assertions to the contrary, his theoretical basis is technologically determinist. Garnham's criticism focuses on productivity. Castells states that the network society relies on increasing productivity which occurs due to information technology. Garnham says of this, “ there is little evidence of such productivity increases” and goes on to state, “ lack of a stable calculable relationship between the values of outputs lies behind the historical difficulties in co modifying information” (Garnham, 2004, 191). Garnham also states that productivity can be looked at in terms of consumption, investment and the relations of production. Both Garnham and Webster criticize the seemingly autonomous role of the mode of development, highlighting instead the importance in determining the role of the mode of production, “ the informational mode of development is

developed for and put at the service of a set of property relations and the goal of accumulation, not vice versa” (Garnham, 2004, 174). Webster and Garnham deliver convincing critiques of Castells’ theory of a network society. I believe the network society is more realistically a development of our industrial society as opposed to a completely new construct. Capitalism remains the economic basis for our society; the uprising of capitalism’s power in various networks is an event that was occurring during Marx’s original critique of our social system in the 19th century.

In an article written by Jack Fischer, Castells says he has been frustrated there has not been more criticism of his work on the network society. “ What criticism there has been has referred to the relative difficulty of reading the work and of his adamant refusal to offer prescriptions” (Fischer, Manuel Castells Brave New World, 1999). Castells said on the matter, “ As stunning as it sounds, I am not aware of any major criticism in published reviews, and I am aware of dozens of reviews in many countries. In fact, it is a little bit disappointing, since I am sure there are many weaknesses in the work, and I would like to debate it more” (Castells in Fischer, Manuel Castells Brave New World, 1999).

Manuel Castells theory of the network society is highly relevant in understanding contemporary forms of social interaction. “ It permeates most societies in the world, in various cultural and institutional manifestations, as the industrial society characterized the social structure of both capitalism and statism for most of the twentieth century” (Castells, 2000, 22). His analysis of the technological, cultural, and institutional transformation of societies around the globe to network societies provides useful insights into

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a constantly changing world of communications. Castells hypothesises that there is little chance of social change within any given network. He says himself that the fundamental dilemma in the network society is “ that political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of cultural codes, embedded in networks” (Castells 2000, 25). The idea of the network society makes us think about how much of our lives depend on these technologies, in an ubiquitous network society we can exchange information and communicate with other remote people and machines untroubled by and sometimes even unaware of the networks or devices allowing such communication. Castells theory of the network society is both engaging and innovative which is one of the reasons it has got so much attention. In a time when our society is going through such intense and powerful transformations, potentially moving beyond an industrial era altogether, it is crucial to have the work of Castells who documents and analyses this important transition though such work as his theory of the network society. His observations on the social and economic dynamics of this information age not only help us better understand contemporary society but will be looked to as a key reference source in the constantly changing years ahead.

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