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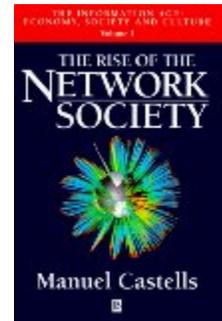
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Manuel Castells. *The Power of Identity.* Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. xv + 461 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55786-874-9.

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FINDING THE EVENT HORIZON ALONG THE BLACK HOLES OF NETWORK SOCIETY

Despite the steady growth in the locutionary incidence of “information,” “information society” and “global economy,” these ideas—however prevalent—are notoriously difficult to pin down theoretically and methodologically (Webster 1995). In fact, what seems most remarkable about “information society” is not “the emergence of information processing as the core, fundamental activity” of capitalism, but the ways in which already extant, twentieth-century inequalities continue into the present. Understanding those continuities and may be more important than delineating the discontinuities.

But, despite the danger in easy invocations of novelty, the “information age”—whatever it may turn out to be—may prove useful in re-framing our ideas of modernity and identity by re-focusing our analysis on loci of culture and political economy. At the same time, we must avoid the opposite side of the dyad, where the “information age” is construed as an absolute break with the past. Rather, the truth of the “information age” lies in an emergent combination of fast-paced, vertiginous change and persistent inertia. Demonstrating this complexity means walking a cautious line of social theory and illustrative example. This Herculean labor has been undertaken by Manuel Castells, a sociologist whose work in urban stud-

ies has been extremely influential in all areas of the social sciences. In 1998, he finished a three-volume opus, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, that he describes as “an empirically grounded, cross-cultural theory of the Information Age” (Castells 1998: xii).

The trilogy begins with *The Rise of Network Society*, a syncretic masterpiece that builds on many of Castells’s earlier insights (Cf. Castells 1989). The second installment, *The Power of Identity*, contextualizes the “culture wars” of the late twentieth-century in the changing political economy, while the third, *End of the Millennium*, extends those arguments into a cautious, not altogether surprising, cultural futurology. It is safe to say that few others could have attempted the scope of this work and that this paean to the information age is the only one of its kind. Remarkably, Castells is largely successful in his evocations of contemporary political economy and identity, a testament to a lifetime of teaching and scholarship.

But the “information age” not only signals reconfigurations in production, social relations and culture, but also knowledge. In the fin-de-siecle “information explosion,” we find a hyperbolic surfeit of information in some areas and a disingenuous “information blackout” in other

areas. If we do not reflect on the power/knowledge machine in the coming (or coeval) “information society,” than we simply reproduce the systematic mystifications wrought in the ideological crucible of advanced capitalism. It is here that Castells founders: not in his own careful empiricism, but in his over-credulous acceptance of sources and pundits who are more symptoms than analysts of information society. However, as I will argue below, Castells’s mistakes are (unintentionally) illustrative of the same network society he analyzes; his oversights and missteps are part and parcel of the “information society.”

As an anthropologist specializing in the United States, I will confine many of my criticisms to Castells’s analyses of that geographic area. Importantly, though, this is no triptych to American exceptionalism. Castells takes great pains to separate the “information age” from “America” and his analysis wanders the globe, touching on examples in every continent. Given both the size of the U.S. economy and its continued imperialism, any study of the “information age” would not be complete without some accounting of U.S. hegemony. However, that said, Castells’s work does not privilege the “American” as a *sine qua non* site of meaning in the information age, hence the deictic “we” and “our” are especially problematic—and de-centering. For Castells, the advent of what he calls “network society” involves changes in every aspect of life, from our grossest material existence to our most inchoate notions of civil society, nation and self.

Our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity. The information technology revolution, and the restructuring of capitalism, have induced a new form of society, the network society. It is characterized by the globalization of strategically decisive economic activities: by the networking form of organization; by the flexibility and instability of work, and the individualization of labor; by a culture of real virtuality constructed by a pervasive, interconnected, and diversified media system; and by the transformation of material foundations of life, space and time, through the constitution of a space of flows and of timeless time, as expressions of dominant activities and controlling elites. (Castells 1997:1)

In the information age, information—however construed—becomes the most important input and output of the economy. Since “information” is both transformative and opportunistic, it colonizes all areas of experience. Hence, the “information age” is also social and

cultural in addition to material.

INFORMATION AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

It was possible, in previous decades, to insist that the U.S. economy was not really dependent on world trade. Even in the 1990s, some economists of a more isolationist bent have suggested that, since exports only account for ten percent of the GNP, international trade is a distant second to the domestic market. But this is an increasingly untenable argument, given the interdependency of financial markets worldwide and the dependency of U.S. manufacturing on international networks of production and investment.

In fact, there is little doubt that there has been a significant shift from what might be called a “world economy,” dating, as Eric Wolf, Emmanuel Wallerstein, and Fernand Braudel have reminded us, from the advent of mercantilism in the late sixteenth-century to the end of World War II, and a global economy structured around simultaneity and, as a corollary, the massive integration of national economies. The first—the world economy—emphasized linkages, trade, domination and colonial relations between “centers” and “peripheries.” Through lines of colonialism, imperialism and unequal trade, even the most far-flung cultures were connected to European, Asian and American metropolises. However, the situation is fundamentally different in the “global economy.” As Castells writes, “it is an economy with the capacity to work in real time on a planetary scale” (Castells 1996:92). Castells cites statistics showing sharp increases in international trade and investment, suggesting an increase in the permeability of national borders to capital (Castells 1996:94). As economies become more “transparent” under neoliberal economic policies and restructurings, international and Foreign Direct Investment become more important as sources of growth and productivity.

But this process, as might be expected in an era of untrammelled, “creative destruction,” has been extremely uneven (Berman 1982). Some regions have tightly integrated, prosperous markets, such as China’s emergent Pearl River Delta (Castells 1996:405). Other areas—already dominant in world markets—have maintained and even diversified their networks (in production, finance, etc.), particularly historically dominant metropolises in the United States, Europe and Asia. One thinks of Saskia Sassen’s “global cities”: London, Tokyo and New York (Sassen 1991). Finally, many of the old inequalities have been compounded in this era of advanced capitalism. That it to say, while a North-South, developed/underdeveloped division can no longer be assumed,

clearly the same cannot be said of Africa and Latin America, where economic conditions at all levels have worsened under the yoke of neoliberal policies imposed by the IMF. Much of Africa and significant parts of Latin America are being progressively shut out of these regional networks in such a way as to render whole nations irrelevant to the global economy.

Thus, the structure of the economy is characterized by the combination of an enduring architecture and a variable geometry. The architecture of the global economy features an asymmetrically interdependent world, organized around three major economic regions and increasingly polarized along an axis of opposition between productive, information rich, affluent areas, and impoverished areas, economically devalued and socially excluded. (Castells 1996:145)

Therefore, while any analysis of U.S. manufacturing would be incomplete without including distribution and manufacturing networks in Mexico and Asia, other areas (Bolivia, Ecuador), are rendered increasingly irrelevant, particularly as the terms of trade in primary products continue to degenerate. But the key difference between this and conventional underdevelopment theory a la Andre Gunder Frank is that “economically devalued” and “socially excluded” areas can exist alongside integrated, regional centers organized into the “space of flows.”

What Castells calls a “variable geometry” is most commonly associated with “post-Fordism,” combining (after David Harvey, Michael Piore and Charles Sabel) a “flexible accumulation” with, among other things, fundamental shifts in the organizational practices of space and time (Harvey 1989; Piore and Sabel 1984). This combination of 1). relatively fixed relations of inequality between developed and marginalized economies and 2). variable development that favors the rapid growth of selected regions (e.g., New Industrialized Countries (NICs) in Southeast Asia) is also true of what Castells terms the emergent “international division of labor,” a combination of increasing inequality and variability. For example, networks strewn across national borders allow both “flexible production” and corporate mobility around sources of cheap labor. But, more important than the growth of flexible production is the advent of flexible organizations that are capable of changing strategies and schedules with sudden shifts in global markets (Castells 1996:439). In order to accommodate rapid, continually disruptive change, corporations supplant “vertical bureaucracies” with “horizontal corporations” (Castells 1996:164).

One of the key components of “post-Fordism,” then,

is the “crisis of the corporation,” a phenomenon by no means synonymous with the death of the large corporation. From Microsoft to the *chaebol*'s continuing dominance in Korea, the big, monolithic corporation is still an important (if not growing) force in the global economy. But conventional, “stove-pipe” arrangements of corporate hierarchies are ill-suited to the rapid changes required by the network society and, as such, have given way to more horizontal corporations that, moreover, transduce corporate boundaries and incorporate networks of small to medium businesses as suppliers, clients and consultants. Like the organization of production in network society, the organization of the corporation seems to evidence the same tendencies towards combinations of “fixed architecture and variable geometry,” with large corporations organizing for maximizing flexibility and innovation while still working to increase their market dominance.

Labor has an uneven relationship with this “new flexibility.” As Noam Chomsky and others have continually stressed, labor—unlike capital—is not free to move across borders. While capital may pursue international networks and increased international trade, labor is more constrained and, as the state concedes more and more to capital's wishes, more fragmented (Davis 1986).[1] This fragmentation is compounded by an emergent division of labor that systematically denigrates work and workers historically represented by unions.

What I call the newest international division of labor is constructed around four different positions in the information/global economy: the producers of high value, based on informational labor, the producers of high volume, based on lower-cost labor, the producers of raw materials, based on natural endowments, and the redundant producers, reduced to devalued labor. (Castells 1996:147)

While there is little to suggest (a la Stanley Aronowitz) the imminent end of manufacturing, or even the deskilling of labor in the classic, Braverman sense, there is nevertheless an increasing devaluation of much of the labor force. At the top of the hierarchy sit the “wired” digerati, symbolic manipulators of the information age and, at the bottom, a growing segment of undervalued—though, importantly, not deskilled—labor. Following global networks of production, labor is likewise differentiated across borders and within places; information-era technocrats live (and work) alongside marginalized workers. The increasing Gini coefficient evident in the United States is even more poignant in American cities, where, in the midst of simultaneous pro-

cesses of gentrification and abandonment, the privileged top-fifth of the population can be found living next door to the lowest fifth (Marcuse 1985).

THE CULTURE OF REAL VIRTUALITY

Since “informationalism” and the logic of information society pervade (or attempt to pervade) every aspect of life and consciousness, the network society also signals a shift to what Castells calls the “culture of real virtuality,” i.e., the replacement of stable formations of place, identity and nation with malleable, fungible “flows” drawn across borders. It is “a culture of the ephemeral, a culture of each strategic decision, a patchwork of experiences and interests rather than a charter of rights and obligations” (Castells 1996:199). We’re on familiar ground here, in the world of the high postmodern eulogized (and celebrated) by Arthur Kroker, Jean Baudrillard, Mark Poster and others: the pundits of cyberspace. The prototype and the agent of this transformation is the prevalence of networked and multimedia communications best exemplified by the phenomenal growth of the World Wide Web since the introduction of the “Netscape” browser in 1995. As institution and practice, though, the Internet, as in other parts of the varied agorae of networked society, combines giddy fluidity with a remarkable (and even menacing) stability. To be sure, there are noted examples of freedom and Puck-ish hacking amidst corridors of government and corporate power. Nevertheless, just-so stories of ecstatic, libertarian anarchy ignore the powerful institutions (e.g., the defense industry, Bell telephone) that enable these celebrated acts of resistance in the first place (Cf. Rheingold 1993).

Instead, as in other dimensions of “network society,” we should look to networked communications for both the explosion of alterity *and* the hypostatization of difference (after Fredric Jameson) (Castells 1996:327). This “culture of real virtuality,” like the mode of production it parallels, is global, but hardly universal. Like flexible organization and flexible organization, Castells’s “culture of real virtuality” impacts people in extremely variable ways. But it is here that Castells’s analysis, so useful in its summation of changes in production, falters, though does so in “fixed architecture” and “variable geometry” that yields up its own information about networked society.

In all these areas, the growth of flexible, networked forms—what Castells calls the “space of flows”—prove antithetical to more grounded, less ephemeral organizations and identities centered around place. The “culture of real virtuality,” Castells suggests, undermines conven-

tional identities rooted in familiar (if historically and socially constructed) categories of race, gender and class. This stem partly from the dissolution of civil society, hence of the legitimating institutions that underwrite identity in the modern, nation-state. Here, Castells argues that “identity politics” arises in the vacuum created by the whiplash of globalization, predicated on a largely defensive reaction to the “space of flows.” In the excluded zones on the margins of “network society,” people foment resistance and rebellion. Thus, the Patriots, Christian fundamentalists, feminists, environmentalists and the black “underclass” are all said to be reactionary forces ranged against the forces of globalization, emerging from the (varied) margins to challenge the (varied) centers. “This widespread, multiform process of social exclusion leads to the constitution of what I call, taking the liberty of cosmic metaphor, the “black holes of informational capitalism*” (Castells 1998:162). But this is in many ways a problematic notion, one that I want to take up with special reference to race.

RACE AND THE UNDERCLASS DEBATE

Castells is no apologist for racism in the United States. He acknowledges increasing racial disparities, pointing out that at least one-third of African Americans, “comprising 45 percent of African-American children at or below poverty level, are much worse off than they were in the 1960s” (Castells 1997:55). He is also well aware of the unequal distribution of inmates in the burgeoning U.S. penal system, noting that, in California in the 1990s, “about four out of ten African-American men were under some sort of criminal justice control” (Castells 1998:147).

But while acknowledging worsening racial inequality, Castells finds the true tragedy of black and white in the United States the formation of a black “underclass” separated from more upwardly mobile, middle-class blacks and seething with violence. For Castells, the persistence (or growth) of racism in the United States is secondary to the division of what he construes as a heretofore united African American community.

How can it be, while society is reminding blacks every minute that they are black (thus, a different, stigmatized human kind, coming in a long journey from non-humanity), blacks themselves are living so many different lives, so as not to be able to share, and, instead, being increasingly violent with each other? It is this yearning for the lost community that is emerging in black America in the 1990s, because perhaps the deepest wound inflicted on the African-Americans in the past decade has been the

gradual loss of collective identity, leading to individuals drifting while still bearing a collective stigma. (Castells 1997:59) This division and “loss of community” is said to result in the formation of a new “culture.”

In a parallel move, end of millennium ghettos develop a new culture, made out of affliction, rage and individual reaction against collective exclusion, where blackness matters less than the situations that create new sources of bonding, for instance, territorial gangs, started in the streets, and consolidated in and from the prisons. Rap, not jazz, emerges from this culture. (Castells 1997:57)

But: are these the “deepest wounds”? Not the spiraling incarceration rates, police brutality, gutted social services and abysmal healthcare? And—with his castigation of “rap”—has Castells been reading too much Adorno?

Whatever the case, it’s plain that Castells has been dipping rather too liberally into William Julius Wilson’s “underclass” pot, articulated in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and codified in the more recent *When Work Disappears* (1996), although Wilson’s ideas—the insistence on “self-reliance” and the pathologizing of culture—have a rather long lineage in the United States, dating at least from the architects of Jim Crow in the years following the Civil War.[2] Wilson also owes much to Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist working in the United States, Mexico, Latin America and India in the 1940s and 1950s, who—in his book *La Vida*—proposed the “culture of poverty” as an explanation for the persistence of impoverished populations, although he (Lewis) never minimized the role of discrimination and underdevelopment in the production (and reproduction) of human misery (di Leonardo 1998:116). But: Lewis’s work was published in 1965 and excoriated by the anthropological (and sociological) community into the 1970s!

The “culture of poverty” was wrong in the 1960s for the same reasons the “underclass thesis”—and, by extension, those “black holes”—is wrong today. First: while Oscar Lewis and Manuel Castells (but not William Julius Wilson) acknowledge racial discrimination and economic inequality in the formation of poor people’s lives, they cannot integrate an understanding of inequality into their analysis of culture as part of daily life. Hence Oscar Lewis, drawing on the heritage of Robert Park and the Chicago School, imagined society as a bit of a functionalist engine that, once started, ran on its own, whether functionally (socially integrated) or dysfunctionally (socially deviant). Castells, for his part, takes great pains to separate out “ghettos” from the rest of the world by positing “black holes of informational

capitalism.” But—clearly, I think—there are links between the global economy and the ghetto that, while not as obviously “information age” like Microsoft, are nevertheless part of the continued practice of institutionalized racism that works to actively denude blacks in the United States of economic and political power. For example, we could hardly exclude banking and mortgage industries from “information society.”

Yet financial institutions take more money out of black neighborhoods (as deposits) than they put back in (as home mortgages), and finance a disproportionately small number of home buyers compared to the total amount of home purchasing in black areas (Taggart and Smith, 1981). These practices along with redlining whole sections of the city have detrimental effects on housing costs, homeownership rates and people’s chances of using house equity to “trade up” to better areas. (Logan and Molotch 1987:129-130)

If bankers and urban planners are all part of the emerging “network society” in addition to being active agents in the formation and maintenance of racial inequality, how did blacks end up in “the black hole of information capitalism,” as it were?

Part of the problem lies in what Eric Wolf termed “billiard ball” models of culture removed from their proper contexts of history and political economy, autochthonous islands of meaning to be compared, denigrated or dismissed. Under what circumstances can we talk about the growth of a “ghetto specific culture”? Only with a great deal of amnesia and a nice dose of myopia, as it turns out. The supposed “class division” between middle-class blacks destroying their Robert Bellah-inspired communitarian ethos is belied by the lack of historical support for the existence of a nurturing, cooperative, and hermetically sealed Jim Crow-era ghetto.

First, it is a “ritually reconstructed community,” according to Brett Williams, for which there is a great deal of counterdata indicating black middle class contempt for, social distance from, and exploitation of the black poor—“offering shabby services at inflated prices”—among whom they were forced to live under Jim Crow. (di Leonardo 1998:125)

Secondly, Castells overstates the division of blacks into a “middle-class” and an “underclass.” The data on African Americans in the United States simply does not support this notion of a dysfunctional “culture” premised on a burgeoning criminal economy that fuels Castells’s

(and William Julius William's) analysis. That is, the people who are so brazenly demonized in "underclass" theorizations are simply working class people teetering on the brink of survival in an increasingly hostile political climate amidst attenuated economic opportunity.

That is to say, Castells can only construct this cliched object-pathologized "ghetto culture"-by ignoring the work of countless historians, economists, sociologists and anthropologists, all of whom offer completely contrary conclusions. Why does he base all of his theorizing on the work of William Julius Wilson? Why not the textured, community studies of Patricia Zavella, Brett Williams, Steven Gregory, Daniel Segal, Mercer Sullivan, Constance Sutton and Rayna Rapp? Hasn't Castells read Michael Katz's entirely convincing de-bunking of the "underclass myth" (Katz 1993)? Or Adolf Reed's devastating attacks on the veridicality of Wilson's conclusions (Reed 1992)? It is no coincidence, I believe, that Wilson is a favorite of Republicans and Democrats alike as they work to roll back the modest civil rights successes of the twentieth century. In addition, Wilson has been extremely influential in the growth of the imbecilic "Racial Realism" school of writing with its bellicose calls for blacks to be more responsible. Simply, it is the sheer pervasiveness of Wilson-induced thinking and policy making that prompts Castells to uncritically triumph his ideas.

To continue Castells's central argument, we find a combination of "fixed architecture" and "variable geometry" in all aspects of twentieth-century life: production, organization, social relations and culture. Why not knowledge itself? That fixed architecture-anhistorical ideas about blacks and other minorities-is tragically tenacious despite the wealth of contrary data. In the "underclass" controversy, we find the endless multiplication of Wilson theories and Wilson references-in the news, in government reports, in the talk shows of middle-America-while contravening ideas are consigned to the backwaters of left periodicals and academic presses. That is to say, in "information society," certain sorts of "information" are easier to come by than others. Recognizing the mechanism of that knowledge-machine is vital to any understanding of "network society."

I end with a tension. Is a global, cross-cultural study the best way to apprehend "network society"? While Castells leaves us with no doubt-courtesy of a series of carefully plotted case studies-that similar processes of "fixed architecture" and "variable geometry" are at work at every level in all places on the planet, the breathtak-

ing scope of his work (extended research and interviews on every continent), conceals the extent to which the social sciences are imbricated in the same forces that work to transform other areas of life. Hence, the "information explosion" in sociology, anthropology and urban studies has been matched by the attenuation of "information" in the public sphere to a conservative consensus castigating the victims of failed neoliberal policy. It is that mechanism: the ability to eliminate certain ideas-particularly contextualized dialectical analysis-from the terms of debate, that we find most invidious in "information society." And it is that mechanism of "network society" that Castells sometimes reproduces (at least in the case of the "underclass debate" cited above) in his own analysis. Given the pitfalls of "network society," what should we do?

FRANZ BOAS AND CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

Franz Boas, German physicist, then Columbia University anthropologist from 1896 to his death in 1942, coaxed anthropology into a professional discipline in the United States and waged a lifetime battle against racism and racist eugenics in the United States and Europe. He also trained other eminent anthropologists: Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston as well as influencing other intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, who attended Boas lectures in Atlanta.

It was Boas who admonished anthropologists and policymakers of his time to abandon the "comparative method" of isolating objectified cultural traits and constructing far-fetched chronologies typing people along a spectrum from primitive to civilized (Boas 1987[1896]:76). His ideas, while anachronistic, make a good deal of sense today, particularly under the resurgence of racist, evolutionary thinking, updated for hypermodernity and boasting faster coprocessors. Without locating culture in ever-widening ambits of context and history, there can be no understanding. It will not do to foist the blame on the supposed "pathologies" of ghetto youth. "Culture" must be studied integrated in the context global political economy and only in that context can "ghetto culture" be understood as part of the same network society lauded in *Wired*.

However: I don't mean this as a negative review. While Castells might be remiss in his ready acceptance of late twentieth-century racist recidivism, the potential for careful contextualization is already there in his case studies and fieldwork. What's missing, I would suggest, is a "reflective moment" subtending the tendency to write

and theorize *about* the global in the same forces that condition a global, political economy.

NOTES

[1]. There is ample evidence—readily found in the pages of *The Progressive* and *Z Magazine*—that labor, having bottomed-out in the 1980s, is rebounding, particularly among recent immigrants (Cf. *The Progressive* 1999).

[2]. In fact, he not only cites Wilson, but also thanks him in his acknowledgments.

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