

SELF AND NET IN THE INFORMATION AGE:
A REVIEW OF MANUEL CASTELLS'
THE INFORMATION AGE:
ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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IDENTITY IS A PECULIARLY modern preoccupation, or so we are led to believe. It accompanies the self-conscious reflection on the self that, as a matter of psychology as well as epistemology, arose in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the speculations of Montaigne, Descartes, Bacon, and others. But for much of the time, the factors that have affected identity have continued to be those that, whether or not so regarded, shaped conceptions of the self in earlier times. Family, religion, place, ethnicity, and, occasionally, class—these were the things that, consciously or not, provided a sense of identity for most people both before and after the onset of modernization.

A few, like Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes*, might have lived in the “republic of the mind,” and like medieval priests and scholars before them, aspired to a truly cosmopolitan existence. And royalty and aristocracy remained international right up to the First World War. But not only was French no substitute for Latin, in an increasingly nationalistic age, intellectuals as well as aristocrats were forced to pursue their activities within the mold of the nation-state. It was a striking symbol of the change that the British royal family, of impeccably German stock, was forced to change its name to the homely, English “Windsor” when nationalist clamor during the First World War made it politic to drop the correct but unacceptably German, dynastic name of “Saxe-Coburg.”

It was indeed the growing force of nationalism that made nationhood increasingly trump other sources of identity. Not that other agencies—the family, religion, and so forth—lost their hold entirely, but they were generally subordinated to the greater requirement of nationality. Only in times of war was this really obvious, but the tendencies were there in every field, from sport to the teaching of history in schools. When it came to a conflict between competing

claims of identity, it was the nation that was expected to triumph. Communist “fellow-travelers” in non-communist lands were widely regarded as potential traitors, and the fate of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other religious protesters against the policies of their country during the Nazi period was simply an extreme case of the overriding claims of nationalism.

The twentieth century has witnessed a paradoxical situation. On the one hand the nation state has increasingly come to be rivaled by supranational forces, economic, cultural, and even, to a degree, political. There are possibilities for seeking sources of identity at these higher, supranational levels. One can be European, rather than simply English, French, German, or whatever.

Professionals can escape national boundaries and seek fame and fortune on an international stage, whether in culture or commerce. There is even once more the call for a return to the cosmopolitan agenda of the Enlightenment, as proclaimed by Kant and others. In the decline of the nation-state, and the increasing salience of international organizations such as the United Nations and its agencies, theorists such as David Held and Daniele Archibugi see the hope of the growth of a “cosmopolitan democracy” that would replace the outmoded political institutions of the nation-state.

Perhaps this kind of supranational thinking and, even more, supranational action is possible only for the elites of wealthy societies. So charged Christopher Lasch in *The Revolt of the Elites*. The rest remain imprisoned within the boundaries of the nation-state, forced to suffer the privations of wildly fluctuating national economies and declining welfare systems. This argument ignores the considerable activity of non-elites in international social movements such as the ecological and the feminist movements. But it has a point, and indicates what is the other side of the globalizing tendencies of the recent period. For while some might be going beyond the nation-state, others are looking for sources of identity beneath, or at least alongside, the nation-state. In some cases, as indicated by the new wave of nationalism that has swept over the world at the close of the twen-

tieth century, they are seeking that identity in a renewed emphasis on the nation itself. In any case there appears to be a contrary movement whereby older sources of identity—religion, place, ethnicity—are finding fresh strength alongside newer ones, such as renegotiated gender and sex roles.

Not all of these, as the case of gender clearly shows, work against the globalizing tendencies of the time. But there are evidently some complex cross-currents to explore. That is the task that Manuel Castells has set himself in this recent multi-volume account of our contemporary condition.

At the close of his massive study, Castells announces that “a new world is taking shape in this end of millennium” (III: 336). Admittedly he does not wish us to be preoccupied unduly with claims of novelty—what matters is the accuracy and usefulness of the analysis—but it is impossible not to dwell on the novel features that form the substance of this extraordinarily ambitious stock-taking of the contemporary world. Among these are a world more tightly meshed than at any previous time in its history; a system of production that remains industrial and capitalist—ever more so, indeed—but where the driving force and engine of growth are now knowledge and information, diffused worldwide through the new information technology; a reshaping of the world of work and organization, leading to the “individualization of labor” and “the network firm,” both forms that contribute to the fragmentation of labor and the decline of classic class confrontations; a more sharply divided and polarized world than ever before, with the rise of a new “Fourth World” made up of excluded and impoverished territories and populations—including sections of otherwise affluent regions—which in response are creating a “global criminal economy.”

The image of the “net” is meant to capture these features of globalization and “informational capitalism.” It is appropriate in the sense of suggesting both their net-like character—a de-centered, diversified cellular interconnectedness and interdependence—and their entrapment of greater and greater areas of political, social, and cul-

tural life in their meshes. One consequence of this is a decisive weakening of the territorial nation-state; another is the rise of a global “culture of virtual reality,” a culture in which electronically-mediated symbols become not just metaphors but the lived reality, displacing traditional time- and place-bound experiences (a theme also treated vividly by John Thompson in *The Media and Modernity* and, differently, by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen*).

Against all this stands the symbol of the “self.” This represents the cross-cutting development whereby individuals assert their identity through a new or renewed emphasis on the particularities of place, ethnicity, nation, gender, or religion. The dialectic of net and self marks the contemporary condition. Castells is reluctant to speculate too much on the outcome of this encounter, and the books, though written with a considerable degree of passion and personal involvement, are restrained in their moral and political judgments. Scholars and intellectuals, he says, should stick to theory and interpretation; it is up to others to make what they will of their findings. But then why, I wonder, does Castells choose Ilya Repin’s well-known “Barge Haulers on the Volga” as the cover picture of his final volume—an image of unending toil and pain, if there ever was one?

What, though, are one’s main impressions on standing back from the vast canvas that Castells himself has painted? Firstly, that the details, the parts, are as important, perhaps even more important, than the whole. I think it is fair to say that the overall scheme is not so unfamiliar—not that any one has attempted to capture it so comprehensively or so voluminously, but that it can be put together in a general way from the writings, say, of Daniel Bell, Fritz Machlup, and David Harvey, and has been attempted before in such works as Scott Lash and John Urry’s *Economies of Signs and Space* and, at a more popular level, Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld*. But the very mention of Lash and Urry’s book underlines Castells’ achievement. As against the intolerable vagueness and obfuscating rhetoric of that work, Castells provides an impressively solid foundation of facts, cases, and statistics on which to rest his general claims. Those who hear only of the general argument are in fact likely to miss what

I consider to be the outstanding feature of this work: a set of inter-linked essays covering, in admirable depth and scope, the principal developments of the end-of-millennium world. Here one can read of the new capitalism and of the changing nature of work and business organizations; the new forms of culture and multimedia; the fading power and legitimacy of the nation-state; why nevertheless nationalism is still with us, stronger than ever before; how and why the Soviet Union collapsed; what is happening to the family; the causes and character of the environmental and feminist movements; the rise of the new global criminal economy; the emergence and consolidation of the Pacific economies of Asia as major players in the new global informational economy. All this is done with reference to the most recent literature, backed up by studies conducted for the most part by Castells himself in regions ranging from Colombia to China, by way of California, Spain, and the Soviet Union. It is a truly remarkable feat of scholarship and endeavor. Most usefully to teachers, many of these essays are sufficiently self-contained to be assigned to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. I have already earmarked "The Environmental Movement" and "The Crisis of Democracy" (both from volume two) for inclusion in my course packet in *Political Sociology*. Another *tour de force* is the 100-page "The End of Patriarchalism" (also from volume two)—noteworthy not simply for the mass of material it covers but because of its central importance in Castells' narrative of the impact of the informational revolution. This chapter shows all the strengths of his approach. It is clearly and vividly written, solidly based on statistical data and field research, and maintains a nice balance between analytical detachment and a sensitive and at times passionate concern for the individuals and groups struggling to find a foothold amidst the changes threatening to engulf them.

The episodic, essay-style approach necessarily has its problems. How to mesh the grand scheme, the idea of the information age, with so varied a range of topics? One has to say that Castells pulls off some striking successes. Globalization and informationalization are shown, for instance, to lead not just to the break up of the Soviet Union but to the disintegration of the Japanese "miracle" in recent

years. In a quite different sphere they are also shown to account for the growing exploitation of children, as workers and as sex objects for tourists and Internet surfers. Similarly the global-local nexus, one of the key structures of the new world, is illustrated at work in areas as different as Colombian drug trafficking, the spectacular recent development of the Chinese economy, and the current attempts to formulate a European identity in the European Union.

Yet at the same time, in the discussion of the African tragedy, for instance, the connections are not always clear. Africa is evidently excluded in the main from the information technology revolution. But that hardly seems to account for its problems, and Castells himself makes little attempt to use such an explanation. Instead more plausibly he advances the hypothesis that it is the absence of a national basis to most African states that has made it impossible for them to construct a “developmental state” on the Pacific Asian model. The ethnic conflicts that plague Africa are the legacy of colonial policies. It would certainly be stretching things a bit much to see them as the assertions of “identity” politics against the globalizing tendencies of the network society.

Castells suggests no such thing. But that throws into relief a deeper problem with his theoretical framework. He refers at one point to “the two macro-trends that characterize the Information Age: the globalization of economy, technology, and communication; and the parallel affirmation of identity as the source of meaning” (III: 311). This seems to suggest a certain symmetry and reciprocity in the relationship between the “net” and the “self,” a structural feature that seems indeed to be present in several of his cases, such as the rise of Russian nationalism. But later he says that the “autonomous identities” sought in the social movements discussed in volume two—nationalist, ethnic, localist, religious, ecological, feminist, etc.—are “external to the organizing principles of the network society.” They derive from and are directed towards “an alternative social logic,” one that breaks with the ideology and institutions of the network society. Hence not only would their success on a broad front be “revolutionary,” in the true sense of that term, their failure or only

partial success—a likelihood heightened by the very fact of their exclusion from the institutional centres of the network society—would likewise leave them as isolated and stranded fragments—“tribes,” “communes,” “segregated locales”—existing in the interstices of the dominant network society (III: 351-2). In the case of either success or failure, they do not seem to belong to the same world of the Information Age; they are visitors from another world.

On the one hand, Castells might claim that while the goals of social movements—the reconstitution of identity—might lie outside the logic of the network society, the means and resources available to them are integrally related to its operation. Hence, for instance, the role of the Internet and other appurtenances of the Information Age in “the first Informational Guerrilla Movement,” the *Zapatistas* of Chiapas in southern Mexico, as also the use of computers and “virtual reality” techniques in the Japanese *Aum Shinrikyo* religious cult. But on the other hand, information technology seems fairly marginal in the ecological and feminist movements that he discusses. In any case the question is not so much the role of information technology in social movements as their causation and development in the first place, and the principles that animate them. Here there seems to me a fundamental ambiguity in Castells’ account. At times reactive social movements are seen as structurally related to the developments of the network society; they are, so to speak, its “other face”—perhaps even, though Castells does not speculate much on this, unleashing the hidden potential of the Information Age to deliver not merely a rich but a just and sustainable world (there are after all several utopias of the information society). At other times these social movements seem the product simply of the “great refusal,” an opposition and a challenge to the network society that arise from its margins or from beyond its boundaries. As such they seem to require a different kind of analysis. To put the point more generally, the relation between the “net” and the “self” seems in need of clarification (and Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* gives considerable help in this direction).

The example of the latest wave of nationalism, at the end of our

century, illustrates the complexity of the matter. It is evident that some of it—the break-up of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the nationalist rhetoric in the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union, the antisemitism in Poland and Hungary—reflects long-standing quarrels and historic enmities. Although it is quite wrong to regard East European nationalism as simply a matter of “the return of the repressed,” it is equally clear that unsolved ethnic and national issues remained buried and disregarded during the period of communist rule. Communism, whatever else it may have done, was conspicuously successful at restraining ethnic conflict. The return of nationalism to the region can therefore fairly plausibly be placed within the framework of “the end of empire”: the wave of nationalism that, as both product and reaction, can be observed to have followed the collapse of empires as much at the end of the two world wars as at the time of the defeat of Napoleon, and has now arisen out of the debris of the Soviet empire (see, for instance, Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen’s collection, *After Empire*). There is no need to invoke the forces of the “net,” except insofar as television and other communications media may have spurred on the movements.

But the nationalism that has been a somewhat surprising feature of late twentieth-century western societies seems to belong to another sphere. Quebec, Scottish, Lombardian, Catalan, Walloon, Flemish, and indeed English nationalism do indeed have historic roots but their contemporary expression cannot be explained simply on the basis of past conflicts. They are in many cases the symptoms of prosperity and success rather than, as formerly, the responses of peoples who felt themselves neglected or oppressed. Here globalization, and more generally the forces of the net, can provide some sort of explanation. For, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, globalization, in an era of the declining nation-state, not only permits the nationalism of small nations, it actively encourages it. Linked to international circuits, such as those of tourism, a people can aspire to independence in the absence of the traditional apparatus of strong state and national army. The small states of Monaco and Andorra, which live essentially off gambling and skiing respectively, might point the way

to the future system of states. Moreover, the controlling powers of the global system—the superstates and multinational corporations—might very well foment such aspirations, on the calculation that small nations are easier to control or bully than large ones.

All this points to the importance and interest of the issues raised by Castells, whatever the ambiguities of his own treatment. What needs to be stressed at the end is the magnitude of his achievement. These three volumes represent a staggering undertaking. Castells has attempted nothing less than to take stock of our entire contemporary world. He has succeeded beyond any reasonable expectation. Truly global in scope, yet sacrificing nothing of the concreteness and detail without which enterprises of this kind can be empty and unsatisfying, this trilogy must rank as one of the great works of “grand theory” of our time.

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