# Critical Book Reviews

Castells, M. *Communication power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 592 p.
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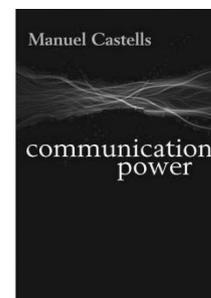
What's new in the network society?

The situation of the world at the beginning of the new millennium is quite reminiscent of that other situation, in the middle of the 19th century, that led Marx and Engels to state that "all that is solid vanishes into air", a diagnosis that Marshall Berman (1982) brought to the title of his impassioned work about that changing world driven by the workers' movement and the creators of the first modernity. After a century and a half, everything that was solid then seems to be disappearing again and social sciences have been trying out, for a couple of decades now, what might be the spirit of the era: *multicultural society* (Kymlicka 1995), *liquid society* (Bauman 2000), *risk society* (Beck 1986) or *global society*.

Manuel Castells has tried to capture the renewed phenomenology of the social world from the conceptual category of *network society* to reveal the collapse of the received hierarchical structures (the nation state, patriarchal family, industrial economy and mass culture), gradually replaced by a new reticular space of nodes and flows generated by logics related to links and interaction. Just as there are no longer any fixed ways to live our lives or any secure conditions, it seems that the old hierarchies have also vanished into thin air. This is how Castells proposed to contribute to our understanding of the evanescence of the world we inherit.

Castells' work is not put forward as a system because it does not propose a closed, complete category system; moreover this cannot be the way in which a reticular thinker works. But it does make a systematic effort to test the heuristic notion of network society, investigating social life to identify the networks that form part of it – economic, political, cultural, informational – and with a pertinacity that perhaps is only matched by Bauman in the research of social liquefactions. This desire for systematic exploration has now led him to tug on one of the strings that were uncovered in *The Power of Identity* (1998) against the background tapestry of the new "impotent" condition of the modern nation state: namely the crisis of representative democracy and the possibilities of reconstructing this.

The result is *Communication power*, a work that actually takes up again those questions asked by Castells at the end of that volume: "Where is power in this social structure? And what is the power in these situations?"(Castells 1998, 398).

Rather than a general theory about power, here Castells reflects on the constitution of power in contemporary societies and, in particular, on political power, giving communication a central role as a source and resource for making it. Castells starts (in chapter 1) by debating the conception of power, which he understands as an exclusive exercise in domination: "Power to do something […] is *always power* to do something against someone […]" (p. 13). A negative theory of power which is justified by the theoretical consensus that Castells looks for and finds (forcing Habermas, ignoring Arendt) concerning the idea that power is basically made by the mediation of two instruments: violence and discourse, above all in what Foucault would call *disciplinary discourses*. The State's coercive capacity being reduced, the battle would now centre on discourses, on the signified, on disciplining minds: "Power in the network society is communication power" (p. 53).

Discourses need to be generated but they particularly need to be propagated in order to achieve their aim. Castells then directs his exploration (in chapter 2) towards the communication system in which this game of discourse plays out, and he discovers that unidirectional mass communication in the hands of large multimedia corporations is not the only way of organising and managing symbolic exchanges in this society. A "new historical form of communication" is now emerging, "mass self-communication" supported by interactive digital technologies. The sign of the times is autonomy in communication: self-generated content, self-directed emission and self-selected reception (p. 70). But in the analysis that follows this declaration, Castells wants to dispel any naive ideas regarding this question: "Yet, this potential for autonomy is shaped, controlled, and curtailed by the growing concentration and interlocking of corporate media and network operators around the world" (p. 135), which act with the complacency and the protection of some regulatory politicians that are privatising and

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fragmenting the management of the "pipes of the Internet Galaxy" (p. 107).

But back to the discourses, to that discipline of the minds that Castells has placed at the heart of the exercise of power in network society. Faithful to his (obviously pure) radicalism, Castells bases this on the latest contributions from neuroscience regarding how the brain works (Damasio), and on cognitive psychology about the organisation of experience (Lakoff, but not Bateson, or Goffman). The mind works by generating frames to orient itself in its surroundings, interpreting what happens and deciding on what action to take, because this is how the neural networks of the brain function. Power, therefore, is the power to define these frames and the ability to communicate them. Saying that "power is generated in the windmills of the mind" (p. 145) is therefore a kind of poetic provocation that Castells then corrects with a pertinent analysis of the "conquering of minds", employed to gain the North American public's consent to go to war against Iraq. And this is how power functions, in effect: in the closed alliance between political system and the core media system – the mainstream media – to create and broadcast frames, without forgetting, obviously, the neural base that all this might have.

In the last two chapters, Castells investigates the mechanisms through which political power is constructed in contemporary societies. The key can be found in the role played by political life in the media, be it large professional corporations specialising in mass media or even those that allow mass self-communication supported by interactive digital technology. The former, associated primarily with distortions generated by *media policy*; the latter, to a promising *insurgent policy*. About this, (chapter 4), Castells notes the consequences that are offered by the convergence of interests between the political system and media organisations in terms of exercising democratic politics: the personalisation of politics, the professionalisation of campaigns, spin doctoring, political marketing, think tanks, info-entertainment, the politics of scandal, etc. In this (chapter 5), he explains several experiences in detail, the common denominator of which is the use of ICTs to promote "new form of insurgent politics with the potential of transforming the practice of politics altogether." (p. 303): the campaign against climate change, the anti-globalisation movement, the demonstrations against government manipulation after the 11 March attacks and the electoral victory of the "unlikely candidate" Barack Hussein Obama.

All texts obviously have different levels of interpretation, which is just another way of saying that they have readers with different levels of expectation and demands. *Communication power* is a good and well documented state of affairs, centred basically on the distortions gradually accumulated by the workings of democratic political life due to the restrictions exercised by what Swanson (1992) called the *political-media complex* and on the possibilities offered by ICTs to change this situation. It would therefore be beneficial, for those approaching this for the first time, to explore this territory.

Nonetheless, those who are familiar with the contributions made in such fields as the political economy of communication or studies about political communication will probably find *Communication power* to be less stimulating intellectually. And they will also be tempted to ask themselves what is new in this network society, when specialised literature has been noting, for at least the last 25 or 30 years, most of the structures and processes that Castells has described here: the domination exercised by large media conglomerates (Schiller, Mosco, Hamelink, McChesney, Smythe), the mechanisms to manipulate public opinion and manufacture consensus (Kurt and Gladys Lang, Glasser and Salmon, Herman and Chomsky), the crisis of democracy induced by the way in which contemporary politics is carried out (Blumler, Gurevitch), marketing techniques that degrade modern electoral campaigns (Swanson, Mancini), the rule of political spectacle and scandal (Edelman, Thompson), not to mention the many works on agenda-setting, priming and framing.

In short, this type of reader will exhaust the interpretation of *Communication power* and will return once again to the crucial question Castells invites us to consider: where is power in this new network society? And he will find this response: "the owners of the multimedia business networks [...] are certainly among the power-holders of the network society because they program the decisive network: the meta-network of communication networks, the networks that process the ideational materials with which we feel, think, live, submit and fight" (p. 421). He will then think that, even if everything solid seems to vanish into the air with so much network, ultimately what is solid will always stay in its place.

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