

effectively use for the purpose of study and career all over Europe. The institutions and their networks and organisations acknowledge their role and responsibility in this regard and confirm their willingness to organise themselves accordingly within the framework of autonomy.”

Students themselves did make their voices heard directly. In March 2001, the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) organized an event in Göteborg, Sweden, and were successful in presenting their views at the Prague meeting in May. In the “Student Göteborg Declaration,” the students declare that they see the Bologna process as a crucial step toward a European higher education area. At the same time, the students demand guarantees that all citizens will have equal access to this area, regardless of their social background. Expanded mobility, higher quality, and increased attractiveness are seen as the important assets that the Bologna process will yield for students, but these must coincide with adequate funding for study grants and for

higher education institutions. The national unions of students have demanded via ESIB an active role as the process unfolds.

Both the institutions and the students seem to have been heard by the ministers at the Prague meeting, given the emphasis placed on the students’ issues in the communiqué. The close cooperation between ministers, institutions, and students in the realization of the European higher education area, is probably the most striking aspect of the Bologna process and crucial for its success. At the same time, keeping all parties involved and focused ensures that the process will be a long and complex one; Berlin is the next stop on the way to 2010.

Note: Texts of the Bologna Declaration, the Prague communiqué, and the *Trends* reports are to be found on several European websites. The most complete collection of documents on the Bologna process can be found at <<http://www.salamanca2001.org>>

Manuel Castells and the Information Age

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Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Vol. 1: *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996; 2d ed., 2000), 594 pp.; vol. 2: *The Power of Identity* (1997; 2d ed., 2000), 460 pp.; vol. 3: *End of Millennium* (1998; 2d ed., 2000), 448 pp. Oxford: Blackwell, price: \$27.95. £16.99 each.

Manuel Castells’ trilogy on the Information Age, first published between 1996 and 1998, was a phenomenon—a publishing phenomenon for the simple reason that it became a best-seller demanding frequent reprints—and an intellectual phenomenon because Castells was delicately poised on the cusp between impenetrable theorizing and breathless popularizing. It is only a little unfair to say that he took the work of people like Alain Touraine and Anthony Giddens and packaged it for the audience of Tom Peters or Charles Handy.

Two of the three books have now been revised—the first, on the rise of what Castells calls the Network Society, because of the accumulation (and acceleration) of relevant data, most of which incidentally tends to confirm his broad thesis; and the third, in which Castells speculates about a new postmillennial social order, because recent events may have detracted from the power and persuasiveness of his original analysis. The second, on the reconstruction of personal identity, new social movements, and the crisis of the nation state, has remained unchanged. But it could be argued that this volume too required revision, not least be-

cause the essentially benign social movements of the 1960s (with which Castells aligns himself in personal, if not intellectual, terms) have tended to be pushed aside by the much more aggressive activism of campaigns against globalization, GM foods, animal experimentation, and the rest.

Castells’ ambition was to develop an empirically grounded, cross-cultural sociological theory of the Information Age. It was a grand ambition, in which he largely succeeded. Certainly no one can complain about a lack of data; indeed there is almost too much at times. This is both a strength and a weakness—a strength because just occasionally social theorizing is unencumbered by empirical data, which makes effective critique difficult; but a weakness because much of Castells’ data, inevitably, are high-level aggregations by national statistical agencies or from the OECD, World Bank, UNESCO, and similar organizations, which raises issues of both accuracy and comparative methodology. What he offers is very much a macroview of social and economic development, which creates difficulties because much of his analysis emphasizes the importance of interstitial, even intimate, cultural change.

Nor can anyone complain about the global reach of Castells’ analysis. His is not a frustratingly parochial mid-Atlantic view of the world, a NATO-ist perspective in which North America and Western Europe (and their outliers) still represent the cutting-edge, the Future. He pays as much attention, inevitably, to East Asia (once rampant, even tri-

umphant, but not apparently in crisis) and to the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union, the other pivot of the post-war world. Nor does he adopt a Brussels interpretation of “Europe,” despite the importance he attaches to the European Union as a supranational organization; the Europes of the South and East are not forgotten. Castells also devotes much attention to Africa, although essentially as a threat, a continent largely excluded from the Network Society (or only linked through dysfunctional, even semicriminal, connections).

But Castells’ success depends on the third element within his ambitious project—to offer a sociological theory of the Information Age. His key concept is the “network” and the key characteristics of networks are that they are open and restlessly evolving structures, to which the various “nodes” that comprise them are ultimately subordinate. Castells does not aim to be a social theorist; it is certainly not his ambition to add to the stock of ideas about postmodernity. Nevertheless, he makes bold claims about the novelty of the Network Society, in which human beings no longer struggle for survival against primeval nature or are driven onwards by a mechanically and culturally constructed “nature” whether in its natural or fabricated forms.

There are obvious echoes of earlier writing in Castells’ account. Anthony Giddens’ concept of “structuration,” according to which structure and action are elided and combined, may be regarded as a (more sophisticated?) precursor of Castells’ network. Daniel Bell’s characterization of preindustrial society as a “game against nature,” of industrial society as a “game against fabricated nature,” and of postindustrial society as a “game between persons” is similar to the *schema* offered by Castells (and there are obvious similarities between Bell’s emphasis on the centrality of “knowledge” and Castells’ concept of “informationalism”). There may even be a whiff of Francis Fukuyama’s end-of-history thesis, although Castells does not succumb to Fukuyama’s complacent triumphalism.

Yet, despite these theoretical dependencies and borrowings, Castells’ remains among the most impressive accounts of contemporary and future society. One reason for this has already been mentioned—his masterful manipulation of empirical data to support his speculations, drawn from an impressively eclectic range of sources. A second is his ability to weave together so many different phenomena into a coherent synthesis—the information technology revolution; the gathering crises of legitimacy, whether national or patriarchal; the (final and irreversible?) globalization of markets; the rise of new social movements such as feminism and environmentalism; and so on. Castells has neither the first, nor the last, word on any of these phenomena treated in isolation; in many cases his description and analysis are frankly derivative. The novelty, and excitement, of his work are to be found in the connections

that he establishes between these various phenomena. His trilogy is its own vindication of the Network Society.

This makes it difficult to reduce Castells’ ideas to a nutshell. But his essential starting point is the information technology revolution. It was this revolution that provoked the parallel crises of capitalism and communism in the 1970s, the former successfully overcome after painful restructuring (remember Margaret Thatcher?) and the latter terminal. In a similar way, the social movements of the 1960s, although only obliquely related to (and even critical of) technological progress, flourished in the open and information-rich environments thereby created. The two came together in the new culture of “informationalism.”

After all, the G7 nations in 2000 are almost the same as the Great Powers of 1900, which may raise some doubts about the alleged fragility of nation states.

Subsequently, nation-states, reconstituted as welfare states in the 20th century, have been undermined by globalization, both socioeconomic and politicocultural, made possible (inevitable?) by information technology. Politics have been “voided of power,” which is exercised elsewhere (by the mass media with their terrifyingly complete grasp of the new “cultural codes”). Nations have been divided into the included, with the United States as its heartland, and the excluded, a new “Fourth World” without the redeeming appeals of the former Third World.

People have been divided into “programmable” and “generic” labor, and all this has been made possible by the transformation of the material foundations of social life, space, and time—in short, by the arrival of the Information Age.

Castells covers such a wide range of issues that inevitably he is exposed on some of them. However deep his scholarship . . . , he cannot be an expert on everything. In any case his, entirely creditable, desire to transcend mid-Atlanticism means that he is forced into inevitably shorthand, and arguably superficial, accounts of the histories, cultures, structures of less familiar societies. But such detailed criticisms are not only unfair; they are beside the point. Instead, criticism, if any, must be directed at Castells’ theses in their entirety.

There are two issues that I believe deserve to be raised—although as an inquiring process rather than destructive critique. The first, inevitably, is that Castells may tend to exaggerate the novelty of some of the phenomena he discusses. I have already pointed out the resemblances between his ideas and those of Anthony Giddens (a decade

ago) and Daniel Bell (a quarter century ago). And, in a more material sense, many of the phenomena he discusses in the second volume concerning personal identities, social movements, and political interdependencies were already well established in the 20th and even the 19th centuries. At times, like so many others, Castells falls into the trap of attributing to postmodernity (or, in his case, the Information Age) some of the defining characteristics of modernity.

This overestimation of novelty would not be so serious if it did not lead him, occasionally, to exaggerate how much things have changed or are likely to change. After all, the G7 nations in 2000 are almost the same as the Great Powers of 1900, which may raise some doubts about the alleged fragility of nation-states. Even in the much more volatile commercial arena the list of top multinational companies reveals remarkable continuities. Patriarchy has been in retreat for more than a century—although, paradoxically, the growing social inequalities of the Information Age may actually obstruct the advance of social egalitarianism. Politics have only been “voided of power” in terms of grand social-democratic programs of reform; they have merely reverted to their predemocratic forms of interest and influence (what Cobbett, of course, rather bluntly called “Old Corruption.”)

The second issue is that Castells is a relentless optimist—and, as such, tends to underestimate the darker aspects of the social change he describes. No place in his analysis for notions of “Risk Society,” popularized by Ulrich Beck (no reference in the extensive bibliography); no sense that “bads” are as significant as “good”; no acknowledgment that risks (or, at any rate, uncertainties) are accumulating at a faster rate than solutions (and that this is inherent in the success of science and dynamism of technology he elsewhere celebrates.) Castells is also a relentless empiricist who is careful not to predict the future, referring disparagingly at the end of the trilogy to philosophers who tried to change the world and insisting that people must be allowed to free themselves from “uncritical adherence to theoretical or ideological schemes” and to construct their practice on “the basis of their own experience.” No acknowledgment that empiricism is itself an ideological position; no acknowledgment that “experience” is itself culturally constructed—a conclusion offered weighty support by his own analysis.

Finally, what implications does Castells’ analysis have for our understanding of the possibilities for higher education? Ambiguous ones, I am afraid. On the one hand, he draws a clear distinction between “programmable” and “generic” labor, which can be read as an endorsement of the university’s traditional mission to develop reflective critical skills in its students (but also leads on to the disturbing conclusion that modern higher education systems have inevitably become mass producers of “generic” labor as well). On the other hand, his analysis of the Informa-

tion Age emphasizes the significance of multiple networks that demand not only technological sophistication but also cultural elaboration—skills that are more readily associated with technical expertise than reflective values, whether Arnoldian or “informational.”

Reprinted, with permission, from *Higher Education Digest*, no. 40, Summer 2001. *HED* is a publication of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information of The Open University, UK. Address: 344-354 Gray’s Inn Road, London WC1X 8XP, UK. E-mail: <cheri@open.ac.uk>. (*International Higher Education* and *Higher Education Digest* occasionally share articles.)

The South African National Plan for Higher Education

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In February 2001, minister of education Kadar Asmal announced the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), without first officially passing it through his own “expert” advisory Council on Higher Education (CHE), which had made some significantly different proposals in its own discussion document in 2000. Interestingly, instead he sought, and obtained, prior approval from internal African National Congress (ANC—the ruling party) committees and the cabinet, and other “alliance” structures linked to the ANC such as the leading trade union federation and the South African Communist Party (both of which had raised political questions about his recent reforms in school education). Clearly, new processes were under way in South African higher education. Moreover, the content of the NPHE differed from a whole series of earlier policy discussion documents leading up to the higher education white paper of 1997, the definitive document prior to the NPHE.

Was the NPHE a shift in direction in terms of policy substance and process? And was it what it asserted—a real plan to transform the Apartheid-based system of higher education into a new system fulfilling the white paper goals of equity, efficiency, and social development?

Core Elements of the NPHE

The white paper of 1997 had initiated the setting up of a Branch of Higher Education within one new Department of Education, putting an end to Apartheid-fragmented governance consisting of separate branches and departments to administer universities and technikons (polytechnics) for