



End of Millennium: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture , Volume III

Manuel Castells

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The final volume in Manuel Castells' trilogy is devoted to processes of global social change induced by interaction between networks and identity.

End of Millennium: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture , Volume III Details

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Irwan says

The last of the trilogy. This book along with the other two comprehensively discuss the changes that happens in the information age.

It opens my eyes on how actually the technology in which I was trained affect the social fabric of our daily life. Would love to read it again someday.

Harris says

The three volumes that this book is a part of ate staggering in scope and often penetrating in analysis. Castells' theory of flow is groundbreaking and provides a framework for an entirely new direction in communication theory, the political economy of mediated communication, and the politics of information and culture.

One critique of these three volumes is that there are moments in all three books where Castells becomes nostalgic for a so-called authentic urban space and culture that is highly problematic. As well, his theory of the spatiality and temporality of flow is undertheorised. that said, this is one of theist important series of works on communication to surface in the last 20 years. All three volumes are must reads.

Andrew says

Castells makes some interesting points in this, the last of his Network Society trilogy, and shows some interesting data, but it's far and away the weakest of the three volumes. Much serious-minded analysis is precluded by the sort of post-Cold War triumphalism and capitulation to the neoliberal project that unfortunately marked a lot of academic thought in the '90s, which comes off as rather dated nowadays. There are some highlights, to be sure, but the first volume is far and away the best and most original.

John Borthwick says

It's hard to imagine reading any of Castell's three volumes in "The Information Age" by themselves. The last book of the trilogy especially expects readers to remember a lot of the concepts in the first two volumes in order to grasp the full picture. Otherwise this book probably comes across as a series of very different chapters on globalization.

Ultimately what makes Manuel Castell's such a fascinating author to read is how he interconnects his own concepts to a variety of topics many readers may have already read about extensively. The scope of this work is overwhelming, and at times I almost felt like the author was taking on too much. But to be fair, what Castell's is trying to convey is a huge idea to begin with. These three volumes address the fact that society, economy, and the political realm have been completely transformed by information and tech revolutions, to something where the three are interconnected in timeless/placeless informationalism. In the final volume,

Castell's looks deeply at the 20th century political/economic ideologies of Marxism and Capitalism, and links them to progress in what their ability to survive has looked like. Where Marxism failed in its oppressive need to control the market for its own political vision, Capitalism's "pluralist" free market structure allowed for its politics to thrive in a fast paced global environment. But Capitalism's success comes at a cost, and this is where I think Castell's is at his most brilliant. He doesn't see Capitalism as something that exists in the classical sense. While he points out that older economic paradigm's still apply's today, capitalism has confusedly been transformed into something nearly impossible to grasp now that it is linked with informationalism. It is this link that has created a market and financial system that is complex and yet anarchistic at the same time. Informational capitalism thus is able to convey profound and insightful ideas in the name of progress and development. Yet it's speed and loose structure leaves masses of people to fend for themselves, creates a ruthless, self supporting, shadow economy in the criminal world, and redefines the political/societal structures of States trying to catch up in the process.

This is where Castell's leaves us after his last book, and I give him a huge amount of credit for not ending with political advocacy but instead with a warning. He reminds his readers that every intellectual who has tried to solve the system in the 20th century has almost always made things profoundly worse. The challenge is to recognize what the world has become, and then from there to intelligently reorganize as individuals and communities to address the fact that we are not trying to create a revolution, but that one has already happened and we are just now scrambling to make sense of it.

Trevor says

The first volume sets out Castells' understanding of the changes that have been wrought to society due to the information revolution – particularly in relation to various forms of 'networking' that underpin that revolution and the changes forced upon us by this upon our conceptions of space and time. The second volume considers the impacts these changes have brought to our notions of identity, with the main message being that the network society often means we are more prepared and better able to 'come out of the closet', to be ourselves and to assert our rights. The decrease in the power of the nation state has been matched by an increase in feelings of nationalism, and of religious intolerance. Volume three turns to the political and economic manifestations of these changes in various regions in the world, and in terms of the growth of the criminal underworld. This book is quite a ride.

The first chapter details the collapse of the Soviet Union and presents his reasons why this became inevitable.

We might as well do this now: there was a time when there were three worlds: the first was the capitalist world, the second was the socialist world, and the third was the 'newly independent' or 'developing' or 'under-developed' world. There is a chapter here where he talks about the fourth world – essentially, a world that is being left out of economic development (much of Africa, for instance) and this is happening at a time when the second world has mostly disappeared.

The second world – the socialist world – he refers to throughout this as Statist. That is, capitalism is based on increasing profits, statist societies were interested in increasing state power. But the problem with this was that power could only be increased by imposing strict controls on information. He mentions at one point how hard it was in the Soviet Union to get access a photocopier. This is incredibly important for his thesis, because, well, he is arguing that we have entered an entirely new era of human history – an information network society – and if that is the case then any society that clamps down on the free flow of information is obviously going to struggle.

He spends a lot of time making precisely this case. He says that the Soviet Union had become the world's third largest economy (today Russia has a GDP about the same size as Australia – yeah, I know, I didn't believe it either, but according to the UN Russia is 12th and Australia 13th. And that puts Russia below Italy and Canada). As he says at one point in this: “in the 1980s the Soviet Union produced substantially more than the US in a number of heavy industrial sectors: it produced 80 percent more steel, 78 percent more cement, 42 percent more oil, 55 percent more fertilizer, twice as much pig iron, and five times as many tractors” (p.26).

His point is that while that might have been something the Soviet Union had longed to achieve in the 1960s, by the 1980s it was symbolic of a deeper problem. That is, rather than being a good thing, it was a symptom of a ticking timebomb. The discussion here of Soviet high technology – and how they shifted policy so as to copy US (IBM) computers, rather than keep going with their own, despite having invested heavily in science and scientists, is mind-blowing. The problem was that the military were terrified they would miss a leap forward in computer technology, something that might make their defence systems effectively obsolete, and so rather than continuing to develop their own computer systems (something they had had a bit of a lead in early on) they had to resort to purchasing or stealing computers from the west and re-engineering them. But, they decided it was better to be six months behind the west, than wiped out.

Except, of course, both roads lead to the same destination. Castells' real point here is that Statism, a command economy based on plans and on bureaucracies implementing those plans, stood in the way of networking opportunities that would develop an information economy. It also stood in the way of the rapid implementation of technological advances into production. Inevitably, the Soviet Union fell further and further behind. And in a cruel twist on Marxist theory – socialism became a fetter on the further development of the productive forces and as such needed to be removed by revolution...

If this wasn't enough, the Soviet Union had never been a single nation, but rather a series of united republics. Nationalism played a part in the fall of the Soviet Union, but he makes it clear that it did so in very odd ways. For instance, the USSR wasn't a 'Russian' empire, as such. He makes the point that perhaps the most disadvantaged nationality in the USSR was the Russian, and that this was something Yeltsin made use of as he came to power, both in Russia and in encouraging other nationalities to split away from the Soviet Union.

But the major problem, and one we still suffer from the consequences of today, was that the planned economy became increasingly 'supplemented' in the last years of the Soviet Union by a shadow economy. The black market soon became a source of wealth to party officials who then further undermined the planned economy to increase their own profits. Then the shadow started directing the real economy. This became a huge problem when the Soviet Union finally fell, because the IMF and US economists who came in to provide an accelerated transition to capitalism had two major aims: to kill off socialism as quickly as possible, and to show the world that a free market is self-regulating and provides the best of all possible worlds all on its own. That is, one group of ideologically driven fanatics were being replaced by yet another group, all be it with University of Chicago degrees. But no legal infrastructure existed to support capitalism – something Castells warned people about during his time as an advisor in Russia. But no one listened. The new situation best suited those in place with the power to pillage, mostly those who are still now in power. That they were criminals seemed hardly to matter – capitalism would sort that out in the fullness of time. That they had been ranking members of the communist party, hardly mattered either. They had seen the light – and greed is good, right?

I'm not going to go into as much detail on the rest of the book – but he gives a history of the Asian economic crisis, China and the problems and opportunities it faces (and given what he had already said about the causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union, that is a seriously interesting discussion). There is fascinating stuff here on Africa, on the growing under-class in the US, on paedophilia and the commodification of everything, and how it is enabled by network capitalism, on criminal networks and their links to drug trafficking in Columbia, and even a chapter on the European adventure too.

This is a remarkable book. I still don't know what to make of it – he is quite conservative and I kept hearing the whisper underneath this, 'there is no alternative, there is no alternative'. This was loudest when he was discussing the failure of the Soviet Union and what lessons could be drawn from that. The main one being that social theory (and theorists) needs to be applied with extreme caution, since confirmation bias means those driven by an absolute belief in the correctness of their social theory are likely to end up monsters. Don't get me wrong, there is clearly something to this. But the problem is that it isn't at all clear how you can ever change anything unless you are committed to bringing that change about. He even says this as well, that the disengaged never bring about social change. His stern advice here ends up being a kind of shift in his seat so he can fart – hot air that might offer a moment's relief, but doesn't particularly recommend itself, given the smell.

This is another book by a social theorist that doesn't particularly offer any solutions to the problems we face, and given what he said about social theorists being careful in their advice, that is hardly surprising. We are firmly on the ground of interpreting the world, rather than changing it. But this interpretation has something in it to annoy just about any reader from any 'camp' – and that can't be a bad thing – there is also enough detail here to give any reader plenty to think about for months.
