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Robert Harding

Manuel Castells's Technocultural Epoch in *The Information Age*

Manuel Castells writes on economy and society in the age of postmodern capital in his sociological trilogy *The Information Age*, published in 1996-98. Aiming for a "grounded theory" (Kreisler 3)—a hybridized approach that synthesizes contemporary French thought with an American empirical tradition—Castells stresses that his work is based on direct observation rather than merely "playing with words" (Kreisler 3), an approach he associates with those who "deconstruct" and abstractly theorize. As he writes at the beginning of the second volume of the trilogy, *The Power of Identity*: "This is not a book about books" (2).

In this essay, I will trace the development of what Castells calls information society. My approach involves three overlapping tracks. First, I sketch what Castells calls network "flows"—of images, wealth and power—in global information technology. Secondly, I evaluate social changes arising out of the network society and how they redefine identity in both global and local contexts. Finally, I read selected science fiction texts with a view to remarking on fictional parallels with Castells's theses on informationalism.

Castells is known for his cross-cultural approach, fusing research into the information-technology revolution in the San Francisco Bay area with quantitative and qualitative data drawn from Europe, Latin America, and the Asian-Pacific Rim. In Volume 1 of *The Information Age*, *The Rise of Network Society*, Castells demonstrates that an information-based future will materialize in the form of a new kind of urban space: the "new global economy and the emerging informational society have indeed a new spatial form, which develops in a variety of social and geographical contexts: megacities" (*Rise* 434). He then outlines how future urban development will assume new levels of power and influence: "mega-cities articulate the global economy, link up the informational networks, and concentrate the world's power" (*Rise* 434). Castells projects this mode of development by detailing a Chinese example, the emerging "Hong Kong—Shenzen—Canton—Pearl River Delta—Macau—Zhuhai metropolitan regional system" (*Rise* 436), which constitutes a massive transformation of the social world for global marketing and informational purposes.

Like sociologist Max Weber, Castells seeks to define the spirit of the age. Where Weber studied the animating force of the industrial age in the Protestant work ethic, Castells sees the ethos of the information age in the *network*. In his essay "The New Weber," Chris Freeman writes that Castells "characterises the 'informational society' as essentially a capitalist system" (156). As Castells himself puts it:

[In] the historical period of the rise of informationalism, capitalism, albeit in new, profoundly modified forms *vis-à-vis* the time of Weber's writing, is still operating as the dominant economic form. Thus, the corporate ethos of accumulation, the renewed appeal of consumerism, are driving cultural forms in the organisations of informationalism. (*Rise* 198)

For Castells, the era of network society represents the first time in history that the basic unit of economic organization is not a subject but a network. The creation of easy-access computer networks was the work of the Clinton administration, which appointed a task force to oversee the planning of a National Information Infrastructure. The first official government publication of this task force envisioned the formation of "a seamless web of communication networks, databases, and consumer electronics" (qtd in Latham 181). The information superhighway, as Vice-President Al Gore dubbed it, marked a new era of organization in Western society; as Rob Latham observes, the infobahn "realizes the epochal promise of [Alvin] Toffler's 'Third Wave' society, decentralizing power and demassifying markets on an unprecedented scale" (182).

This network organization is also the cultural glue that holds society together. It is this phenomenon that Freeman describes as the "ethical foundation of the network enterprise" and "the spirit of informationalism itself" (156). Castells defines this informational spirit as "the culture of creative destruction accelerated to the speed of the opto-electronic circuits that process its signals. Schumpeter meets Weber in the cyberspace of the network enterprise" (*Rise* 199). There are reverberations here of the Marxism found in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1988), where "towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all—all these are made to be broken tomorrow" (99). This creative destruction, carried by a "multifaceted *virtual* culture," "enforces powerful economic decisions at every moment in the life of the network" (*Rise* 199; emphasis in original).

Contemporary critics see Castells's work on the network society as most closely resembling the "postindustrial" theories of Daniel Bell, a disillusioned Marxist who eventually became a cultural conservative. Castells, while situating himself in a more radical intellectual tradition than Bell's liberal Weberian framework, nevertheless acknowledges his debt to the man he describes as a "forebear ... of informationalism" ("Informationalism" 26). Indeed, Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) was a key text for Castells, presaging the demise of revolutionary possibilities in a pluralist society dominated by information technology. Castells's work also bears some resemblance to Anthony Giddens's sociology: both share initially radical instincts that have gradually shifted over the course of their careers, leading them to adopt a compromised form of politics in the globalized era. Giddens's influential text *The Third Way* (1998) advocated the notion of a neoliberal form of capitalism that promoted intervention in the economy only at crucial moments in an otherwise unfettered free-market system. The premises of *The Third Way* are further extended by Giddens's recent work, *Runaway World* (2002), which foresees an epochal "expansion of democracy" due to the imperatives of

globalization (5). Giddens espouses an adaptive capitalist technocracy, essentially the same technological paradigm described by Castells himself.

Central to *The Information Age* is Castells's distinction between the classic Marxist mode of production and the informational paradigm he refers to as the *mode of development*. The new socio-technical paradigm of information technology presents us with a new way of generating wealth: the action of "knowledge upon knowledge itself [is] the main source of productivity" (*Rise* 17), and "a technological revolution, centred around information technologies" is radically "reshaping, at accelerated pace, the material basis of Society" (*Rise* 1). Castells agrees with the "postmodern" view that the working class is no longer the privileged agent of history, reaching this conclusion through a reading of technological transformation and global capitalism that is descriptive rather than critical.

The Origins of Informationalism. According to Castells, the information age began to emerge at the end of the 1970s, as the so-called "post-war settlement" increasingly gave way to a revolution in information technology. The post-war settlement of the 1950s and 1960s promised full employment, a steady rise in living standards, and the creation of a mature welfare state. This Keynesian model of politico-economic management entered a period of stagnation and upheaval in the 1970s, leading to a structural re-organization that deployed information technologies in order to stimulate new forms of commercial activity and promote technical efficiency. For Ernest Mandel, this new technological regime reduced human labor costs by eliminating "direct contact by human hands" (193), producing a "permanent pressure to accelerate technological innovation. For the dwindling of other resources of surplus-profits inevitably leads to a constant hunt for 'technological rents' that can only be attained through permanent technological 'renewal'" (192). The new flexibility offered to capital by information technology is intimately linked to the accelerating progress of globalization, permitting capitalists to keep down labor costs while exploiting emerging markets. In his analysis of the rise of this new global system, Castells comes close to figuring politico-economic development entirely as an extrapolation of technological possibilities—that is, the network society thesis has been seen as a kind of technological determinism.

On the other hand, commentators who stress this techno-determinism in his work tend to overlook Castells's analysis of the importance of specifically cultural factors in fostering the growth of the network society, especially the student rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s. For Castells, the significance of the free speech movement on the Berkeley campus in 1964 and the May 1968 Movement in Paris was their promulgation of an ethos of social autonomy and individual freedom, beyond the strictures of the state, corporations, and the patriarchy. Yet Castells also follows the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies group in seeing the 1960s student movement as essentially a "middle-class revolt" that was "*profoundly adaptive* to the system's productive base" (Hall et al. 65; emphasis in original). In Britain, "the conventional wisdom was that 'affluence' and 'consensus' together were promoting the rapid 'bourgeois-

fiction' of the working classes. This was producing new social types and new social arrangements and values" (21) that were being expressed through the increasingly strident demands of contemporary youth.

The structural crisis of the 1970s was not unmarked by violence. As Gopal Balakrishnan notes, in Italy the far-left Autonomia movement, "the descendents of earlier street clashes," had begun to recreate themselves as "imagined proletarians" (100). In Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan, opposition to dictatorships and criticism of the work ethic and social conservatism burgeoned during the same period. Castells attributes the transformative cultural values of the 1960s and 1970s to a liberated atmosphere in which the new information age was constructed. Indeed, the vanguard social and cultural values inhered in the very design innovations that powered and shaped the oncoming technological revolution. Though the architects of this new era were not those who had fought behind the barricades in the Sixties, they contemplated the new technology as a liberator from corporate hierarchy and an embodiment of free expression, personal autonomy, and anti-establishment politics. As Latham shows in his analysis of the rhetoric of the postindustrial utopians of the period, insurgent youth and emergent technologies "display similar properties, as if attuned to each other in their developments: technological growth is driven by a youthful spirit of innovation, while youth itself shows a buoyant adaptability that permits accommodation with radically transformative technologies" (145).

By contrast, in the 1990s, when the information regime was more fully emplaced, resistant youth began to define itself not in tandem with but against the techno-system. Douglas Coupland's celebrated novel *Generation X* (1991) manifests this new subjectivity. As Mark Forshaw notes, the characters in *Generation X* "refused or attempted to refuse the almost universally commercial, fully commodified and success-oriented consumer society into which their bourgeois upbringings and superior education were supposed to deliver them" (41). The generally white, middle-class refuseniks abandon the consumerist urban America, preferring to wander its narrowing margins; in their attempt to escape the clutches of network society, the characters move from urban centers to the Palm Springs desert and finally across the border into Mexico. The term Coupland invents for this contemporary form of wanderlust is "Emallgration: Migration towards lower-tech, lower information environments containing a lessened emphasis on consumerism" (201). The flight of this disillusioned middle class invokes Castells's vision in *The Power of Identity*, the second volume of his *Information Age* trilogy, although here the middle classes evidently still have the luxury of choice in distancing themselves from the full effects of these "*black holes of informational capitalism*" (*Power* 162; emphasis in original).

Social and Subjective Being. If the material conditions of social life have been transformed in the information age, as Castells indicates, then the new era must also have brought with it a shift in the relations of production. *The Power of Identity* delineates the exhaustion of the clear hierarchies of the previous industrial age, showing how the prevailing cultural attitudes of the 1960s and

1970s helped give rise to the nodal networks of informationalism. According to Castells, the dominance of the new mode of capitalism has transformed social structure precisely because of its global nature. The diminution of the role of the working classes Castells attributes, in part, to the rise of identity politics in the radical cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s; as Frank Webster comments, contemporary politics has shifted from an emphasis on class issues towards the “social movements of feminism, ethnic nationalism, and environmentalism” (67). This is precisely the nascent “multiculturalism” that Slavoj Žižek attacks as an emanation of capitalist liberalism, radically repositioning the progressive legacy of 1960s identity politics by seeing it as adaptive to the structures of late capitalism—a position with which Castells would largely agree.

Castells also believes that traditional labor has been reduced and replaced by informational labor: as networks come to govern, capital flows globally. The working class becomes redundant through a combination of automation, networks create new niche markets from which traditional labor is excluded, and labor is outsourced to geographically remote and cheaper zones of the world. The elimination of a clearly delineated working class simultaneously diminishes the once instantly identifiable capitalist class of the high industrial age. Castells contends that there now exists a “faceless collective capitalist,” a group described by Robert Reich as a shadowy cadre of “symbolic analysts”—the accountants, financiers, investors, advertisers, software analysts, and so on who run contemporary capitalism and trading in “data, words, oral and visual representations” (177). At the same time, an entire informational underclass has grown up, as Latham notes: “for every internet entrepreneur who strikes it rich in Silicon Valley, there is an invisible army of programmers, telemarketers, Web site designers, chatroom monitors, and cybersex workers whose stake in the system is considerably less rosy” (166).

The Network Society facilitates the process of globalization. Technological progress, however, has brought with it a conflicted search for identity, since the multiple channels of the Information Age offer a range of prospective identifications that militate against the homogeneous representation of social subjects that existed in the pre-Information era. In reaction against this deconstructive proliferation, there has been a “widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalisation and cosmopolitanism” (*Power 2*). In *The Power of Identity*, Castells scans the planet for evidence of this reactive monoculturalism that appears in the forms of religious fundamentalism (Islamic and Christian; he doesn’t mention Hindu), ethnic identity, and oppositional movements against the global, such as the Zapatistas of Mexico and Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo cult. To these, Castells adds environmental pressure groups, world feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation movements.

In addition to these emerging groups that define themselves in reaction to the structures of global information society, another key symptom of the Information Age is what Castells calls the “fourth world.” This term encompasses all of those who are irrelevant to the networked operations of informational capitalism, such as unskilled workers and people living in areas of social exclusion such as sub-Saharan Africa or the inner-city ghettos of the United States. Castells writes

incisively of the American poor, who live adjacent to the privileged operatives running this new-world system:

American inner city ghettos, and particularly the black ghetto, have become part of the earthly hell being built to punish the dangerous classes of the undeserving poor. And because a large proportion of black children are growing up in these neighbourhoods, America is systematically reproducing its deepest pattern of social exclusion, inter-racial hostility, and inter-personal violence. (*End* 145)

The fourth world describes a structural exclusion in the new order as Castells sees it. Under this new order, the demands of flexibility and employment on a short-term basis result in the slippage of the socially disadvantaged into the fourth world. Castells argues that the United States is the most unequal place on earth; the excluded individual is unable to keep pace with the acceleration of informational change. This problem affects the many traditional laborers unable to respond to rapid changes in the global marketplace, but it also afflicts the stockholder who doesn't use current information to track his investments. Social exclusion is the penalty of a belated response to informational change, and although such exclusion is not a new phenomenon, its normalization under the present system now appears to be permanent.

The normalization of the structurally excluded is a repeated theme in recent science fiction texts, from the subcultural fascinations of cyberpunk to cinematic efforts such as Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (2003). The excluded or Castellsian fourth world is exemplified in Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995) by the "thousands of Outer Tribesmen now encamped upon the dead streets of the Pudong Economic Zone" (488), an ethnic salad of "Ashantis, Kurds, Navajos, Tibetans" (490). In *Code 46*, Tim Robbins's character is hawked goods by a socially-excluded group of beggars, or in the parlance of the film, "the uncovered"—those who cannot get health or other forms of social insurance. This group, depicted as a desperate embodiment of chaos subsisting outside fortresses of privilege and order, no longer enjoy the benefits of air travel, modern apartments, and the informational network. Structures of inclusion and exclusion in *Code 46* are also racially marked. The network carries exact information on the uncovered's identity and unsuitability for work, travel, or other benefits: it is a system of sorting and surveillance.

In the systemic informational era, the individual is more than ever prone to an anxiety borne out of the possibility of radical freedom from previous constraints on human identity. Psychologist Erik Erikson had observed, as early as 1950, how "the patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should ... be or become" rather than being inhibited "from being what and who he thought he knew he was" (242). The modern flexibility of institutional structures has, according to Richard Sennett, "accompanied the short term contract and episodic labour" where "network arrangements are lighter on their feet" (23); for Sennett it is the "time dimension of the new capitalism ... that directly affects people's emotional lives" (25). In the hyper-responsive form of contemporary capitalism, surviving means "keep moving, don't commit yourself, and don't sacrifice" (25). Avoiding Sennett's

critique that “this world doesn’t offer much, either economically or socially, in the way of narrative” that might orient identity (30), Castells suggests that we need to be adaptive to this fluctuating, mutable society or risk total obsolescence.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Anthony Giddens outlines how the ontological sense of self emanates from the selection or creation of lifestyle choices in the Information Age, “the existential terrain of late modern life” (80). Giddens refers to a “post-traditional social universe, reflexively organised, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global” (80). A consequence of this realignment is that the self undergoes massive change. Giddens sketches the central features of modernity that form personal identity: living in a post-traditional order, the pluralization of life-worlds, the existence of methodological doubt in an accelerating society where procedural options proliferate, and the prevalence of highly mediated forms of experience (82-83). Furthermore, where situations of work, leisure, or family were previously all relatively local, now the “settings of modern life are much more diverse and segmented,” to the point that both the public and the private spheres are also subject to rapid change or “pluralisation” (83). This is yet more evidence of a certain homology between Giddens’s work and Castells’s analysis of the information society. Castells’s formulation of a new stratification of class, the reassertion of identity, and his concluding gambit that we need to become proficient in a kind of self-programming, all parallel Giddens’s discussion of an emergent “life-planning” (85).

Castells’s investigations of technologically manipulable subjectivities have been explored in contemporary science fiction. More specifically, recent sf has been investigating the concept of a techno-penetrative form of radical self-fashioning. In Greg Bear’s *Slant* (1997), such self-therapy is a pre-requisite for continued legitimate functioning in the social order: to be “therapied” is to be allowed continued access to the labor market, and social ambitions can be enhanced by nanotechnologically-restyled bodies. Greg Egan’s short story “Reasons to be Cheerful” (1997) similarly includes a protagonist, a deeply depressed teenage boy, receiving an “annual psychological assessment” (216) in a late-capitalist world of private medicine and private health insurance. The youth must assess and adjust his own mental state in a difficult world: “my only freedom came down to a choice between hunting for reasons to justify my sadness—deluding myself that it was my own, perfectly natural response to some contrived litany of misfortunes—or disowning it as something alien” (200). Justina Robson has also used the theme of biotechnologized therapy in her book *Mappa Mundi* (2001). At one juncture her protagonist contemplates the effect that bio-software will have in re-functioning the work-force away from depressive illness, since “depression on its own robs the whole country of millions of man days a year” (70); yet this scientist is also fearful of the potential for the governmental and corporate management of psychic life. The denouement involves the release of counter-totalitarian nanotechnological software programs, “Prefer Compromise” and “No Fear” (453), containing information that will paradoxically allow populations to resist programming. This therapeutic technology of the self is further exemplified in the “counselor”

character in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; as James Brown observes, “the appearance of a counsellor among the officers” is “indicative of Star Fleet’s desire to achieve maximum efficiency by ensuring that all crew members conduct their emotional lives in fundamentally similar terms,” thus effecting a “shaping of the capacities and selves of the crew to ensure maximum efficiency” (118). What Castells describes as selves adapted to informationalism might therefore be regarded as problematic instances of the extension of biopolitical power: in this instance, sf has more critique to offer than critical sociology.

Epochs and Flows. By giving a proper name (“The Information Age”) to contemporary society, Castells makes claims for a historical rupture; the very title of Volume 3 of his trilogy, *The End of Millennium*, cements this confident assertion. Yet such a view demands scrutiny, since assertions of radical social rupture depend on what John Brannigan considers an over-reliance “upon an uncritical narrative structure which posits a recognisable origin or turning point” (9). Others have clearly demarcated major epochal transformations in the postwar period: Fredric Jameson’s work, for example, relies on epochs that shift through Market Capitalism and Monopoly Capitalism to Multinational Capitalism (*Postmodernism* 35), a series of transitions (borrowed from Mandel) that forms the backbone to many of his assertions about the structures of the postmodern epoch. Technology is important in Jameson’s account, but it is not nearly so determining as it is in Castells. However politically divergent, the epochal economic logic of Castells can still be used to support the cultural paradigm of postmodernism proposed by Jameson.

One of the central organizing concepts for Castells’s new epoch is the “space of flows.” Castells argues that capitalism has ceased to be based in nation states but has instead become disorganized and global, based on “a space of flows, and on timeless time, [that] is historically new” (*End* 356). What we are seeing is a new social logic that “dominates the historically constructed space of places, as the logic of dominant organisations detaches itself from the social constraints of cultural identities and local societies through the powerful medium of information technologies” (*Informational City* 6). Informational flows of images, wealth, and power reconfigure the historical and social necessity for place-based spaces. Castells’s conception of the space of flows imagines networks as constituting “the new social morphology of our societies.... [T]his networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power” (*Rise* 469). This spatial logic now transforms social organization.

Castells’s second defining epochal concept is “timeless time,” the temporal order of the Information Age. Agrarian, industrial, and post-industrial epochs each have different temporal properties, and the “new informational mode of development has radical implications for the social organisation of time” (Bromley 106). Where agrarian time was set by the rhythms of nature, industrial time was configured around clock time and was synonymous with “the triumph of reason, the affirmation of social rights[,] ... the prolongation of life, ...

career patterns, and the right to retirement” (*Rise*, 445-46). Timeless time is of a different order entirely, having no socially meaningful sequence. As Castells puts it, “organisational, technological, and cultural developments characteristic of the new, emerging society, are decisively undermining this orderly lifecycle without replacing it with an alternative” (*Rise* 445-46). Castells is thus unapologetic in offering a ruptural account of social and technological development in the Information Age.

This thesis of the spatial and temporal re-ordering of contemporary experience has echoes in the cultural analysis offered by William Gibson’s recent novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003). In Jameson’s commentary on the book, the suspension of time is seen as a corollary of “the global provenance and neo-exoticism of the world market today in time and space” (Fear 108); the internet-borne “footage” at the heart of the novel is for Jameson “the deeper subject of *Pattern Recognition* which projects the utopian anticipation of a new art premised on ‘semiotic neutrality’” (111). The footage is a collation of images that are known to a global network of insiders and aficionados; they form a subculture that invites participants to trade theories about its meaning. The semiotic neutrality of the footage is mirrored in the unbranding of the protagonist’s clothes in the book: Cayce Pollard has the names and brands of all of her clothes removed since their signification causes her to suffer feelings of nausea. It is this “systematic effacement of names, dates, fashions and history itself” (111), in Jameson’s view, that reflects “everything the footage seeks to neutralize: the work becomes a kind of quicksand, miring us ever more deeply in what we struggle to escape” (112). Jameson’s contention is that timelessness is key to the erasure of our historical identity, and the encroachment of timeless time and global commodification advances through the agency of networked information technology.

Castells is not a cultural critic; cultural forms are largely absent from *The Information Age*. Castells does comment briefly on culture in relation to the new epoch he has coined, but in rather incidental and generalized ways: “that’s why we are living in two cultures,” he comments at one point, “a culture of bewilderment about the world we live in and a culture of innovation, creativity, and the opening of new frontiers. This cultural divide may be as important down the line as the economic and social divides” (*Making of Network Society* 4). The limited comments on architecture in *The Rise of the Network Society* are derivative of classic postmodern critiques of culture, such as “Panofsky on the Gothic cathedrals, Tafuri on the American skyscrapers, Venturi on the surprisingly Kitsch American city” (418), and generally they reproduce views espoused in Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Castells has nothing explicit to say on literature in general or science fiction in particular, despite his technological emphases and the futurological bent of his writing. But this gives cultural critics an opportunity to deploy his sociological work for their own critical and creative ends.

The sociological rigor of Castells’s trilogy establishes a framework for reading contemporary realist fiction and sf. Indeed, his work may help us locate sf’s place in the dominant formations of global capitalism and to see how

technology impinges on artistic culture as a mode of awareness. *The Information Age* is an excellent theoretical resource to read alongside recent science-fictional efforts, such as the reformulation of subjectivity envisioned by Justina Robson and Greg Bear's prognosis of a society in which extreme forms of psychotherapy are compulsory and bodily re-design is a mark of social status. The urban conglomerations projected in William Gibson's *Sprawl and Chiba City in Neuromancer* (1984) anticipate to some extent Castells's futurological mapping of a Guanxi-like super-capital urban environment exploding in China. The Shanghai of *Code 46* is just such a mega-city. Castells's notion of informational guerrillas resisting the powers of global capital almost reads like a post-cyberpunk plot set in an entirely deregulated world market. Both the form and content of contemporary sf narratives might be fruitfully opened up with Castells's conceptions of timeless time and the space of flows.

Limits. Marxist critiques of Castells focus both on his over-inflation of the importance of the Information Age and on his detached political standpoint. Alex Callinicos objects that the so-called radical character of the Information Age is in fact much less revolutionary than the invention of "electric lights and motors; the internal combustion engine, and air travel, which transformed everyday life much more dramatically" (216). He also attacks the proponents of Third Way capital and informationalism, arguing that they "will look as foolish as their counterparts did after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929" (216). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* devotes only twenty pages of critique to the "Informatization of Production," thus suggesting its relative insignificance in their analysis of the new global system. Yet Castells has compiled a field study and global representation of the Information Age using concrete methodology and accumulating a host of specific sociological examples, by contrast with the rather airy abstractions of Hardt and Negri's tome. Despite his seeming lack of a political stance, Castells's work can form the material basis for a political critique of the multinational technocracy currently spreading across the globe.

Castells's research took him around the world, across Europe, America, and Asia, and he engaged a research team distributed in a global network. Is he an emanation of the very system he describes? John Tomlinson writes of a certain kind of globalization theorist who bemoans global homogeneity precisely because s/he rarely leaves the international cocoon of the airport and the "five star" insulation of hotels and western commodities. As a result, "the homogenization thesis presents globalization as synchronization to the demands of a standardized consumer culture" (6), smoothing the passage of international leisure for business travelers. Yet to "decide whether the homogenization thesis really obtains you have to venture outside the security of the terminal and yet progressively deeper into the cultural hinterland" (6). Some have critiqued Castells's methodology by suggesting that he uses cross-national data in a spurious way to comment on the decline of sovereign nations (Fuller 203); it may be then that his depiction of information society is little more than a glib transnational conception or simply a vision of "Empire.net," as Mark Williams suggests (255).

In describing Manuel Castells's trilogy on the Information Age, Anthony Giddens suggested that "[i]t would not be fanciful to compare the work to Max Weber's *Economy and Society*" (qtd in Kreisler 1). Weber has been seen as a liberal who "does not ... provide us with a clear moral message by which we could guide ourselves through social reality.... Weber saw historical change as the unintended effect of endless social processes and contingent circumstances" (Kreisler 9). Castells, in a characteristically open-minded flourish, quotes Weber's poignant words:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development, entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be great rebirth of old ideas, or if neither, mechanised petrification, embellished with a convulsive sense of self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved.' (*Rise* 200)

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews Manuel Castells's contribution to the theory of high-tech globalization in his sociological trilogy *The Information Age*. I examine Castells's claim that so-called Network Society is a discrete period in history, an epoch that incorporated the liberal individualism of the 1960s with a structural reorganization of labor. I then investigate informational networks in terms of their capacity to transform our social being, assessing the political implications of Castells's thesis through reference to a range of social theorists. Specifically, I consider how Castells's evaluation of the political and cultural resistance to global homogenization leads him to advocate systems of advanced self-management, radical self-fashioning, and individual adaptability to accelerating technoscientific change. I conclude with an analysis of the science-fictional nature of Castells's futurology and its potential utility as a theoretical framework for sf critics.