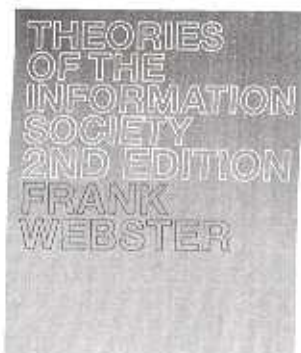


## Feature Review

**Webster's World: Capitalism, Continuity  
and Coercion in the Information Age**

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Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 304 pp.

A great deal has been written, reported and screened on the extent to which the future of humankind is harnessed to the promises of information technology (IT). Many people have adhered to a utopian rhetoric involving technology. We are told endlessly—by policymakers, business leaders, activists and scholars—that we have already entered a new age, driven by the transformative power of information, the handmaiden of what is conventionally described as “globalization”. The possibilities on offer in this brave new world are seemingly without restriction, presaging a new way of living and a qualitatively different social world. In short, because we have more information therefore we now inhabit an “information society”.

Most obviously, IT is championed as the catalyst for economic growth and development as capitalism offers spectacular proof, again, of its creativity and vitality. The new communications technologies and the new investment opportunities they permit are, according to most expert opinion, setting the terms for policies of “competitiveness” and “flexible specialization”. This is the world of the acclaimed “new economy”. It signals not only unprecedented gains in productivity but also a transformation of the underlying business practices set in train by the spectacular growth of informational activity. In turn, IT is said to have fundamentally altered the structures of employment and the very meaning of work itself. Today the major analytical and policy focus is less on the technological aspects of the new society—which are taken for granted—but on the significance of

occupational change. The "new economy" is being energized and led by the new heroes of the age whose edge comes from an ability to generate and manipulate information. They are, in the new vocabulary, the "knowledge experts", the "symbolic analysts" or "informational labor". For in the words of the management guru, Charles Leadbetter, "we are all knowledge workers now" and if we are not then we are likely to become redundant, presumably both literally and figuratively.<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, then, technology, information and occupational change offer the promise of a reversal of the long downturn evident in the world economy since the mid-1970s. More than this, they also create a solution to the uneven geographical development of the former industrial regime of accumulation by constructing and appropriating a new dialectic of space and place. The "new economy" may have been born in the US boom in the second half of the 1990s but the very fact that it is driven by borderless information technologies means that its potential, at least, is truly global. In other words, IT creates an unbounded world or what David Harvey has recently called "spaces for capital".<sup>2</sup> In ways analogous to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries IT is creating "a society of greater richness and complexity", only this time on a global scale.<sup>3</sup> It is a world so different that its emergence can only be described as a revolution.

If these far-reaching ramifications of IT for economic affairs were all that was being claimed by its advocates then it would be startling enough. But the technological and informational exuberance goes further than this. IT is also said to be at the heart of every major contemporary development, from democracy and identity to power and social space, from personal freedom and individual lifestyles to collective security and the public sphere. No longer are the large corporations the only players. States are using and learning to use IT to conduct business and enhance their legitimacy among citizens under the rubric of "good governance". At the same time, a global civil society has been spawned that spins new webs of connectivity which contest, if not weaken, the old order of international politics inscribed by the states themselves. It seems that we can all reap the rewards of burgeoning information and, at the same time, reshape the concepts, political imagination and agendas of the new age.

The time is ripe for a reappraisal of the concept of the information society. What sense are we to make of the informational turn? What precisely is new in the information society? To what extent does it compel a fundamental shift in our theoretical and conceptual frameworks of social, economic and cultural transformation? While the optimism about the core developments associated with IT remains fairly robust, there is little doubt that a second wave of analytical commentary is now emerging that raises some hard and critical queries about what is really happening. The book discussed here—written by Frank Webster—is situated at the frontline of this sceptical second wave. Webster is an historical sociologist by disciplinary training who has been celebrated as a theorist of the "information society" for more than 20 years, beginning with his influential book on the role of photography in politics and his study of information technology, somewhat self-mockingly sub-titled a "Luddite analysis", written with his long-time collaborator, Kevin Robbins.<sup>4</sup> His most important contributions to developments in the information and communications domain lie in his studies of informational cities, the virtual university, information warfare, government information policies, new social movements' use of the internet, and democratization and the new media. It is an impressive prospectus. Taking these intellectual interests together, Webster's overall project can be described as offering a critical social theory of the information society.

*Theories of the Information Society*, a completely revised edition of a text first written in the early 1990s, offers not only a critical commentary on what a number of leading social thinkers mean when they refer to the "information society" but also an extended statement of where Webster stands on these issues of debate. In doing so, it therefore provides an illuminating reprise of his remarkably consistent assessments of this turbulent era. Webster's method is interrogative and his conclusions on the very notion of an "information society" are firmly skeptical. He makes no apology for eschewing commentary on the populist and powerful promoters and their "rash of pronouncements" on the information age. As he notes, there is just too much of this tendentious nonsense in circulation: "intellectually slight, derivative, analytically inept and naïve on almost every count". Webster certainly does not pull his punches. Instead, he proceeds by way of what he calls "encounters" with five major theorists—Daniel Bell, Manuel Castells, Herbert Schiller, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens—



as well as exemplars from the *régulation* school and postmodernism. These are thinkers who show scant respect for disciplinary boundaries and who have long been at the center of current debates in social science. To engage with them is a daunting task but one which Webster carries off with clarity, coherence and, it has to be said, critical bite. His insights are especially valuable because they reveal the limitations of highly attenuated accounts of "information society"—a term he ultimately rejects—which enjoy so much vogue among many current social scientists.

Webster has one overwhelming aim. It is to advance a reading of "information" as it is depicted in different theoretical interpretations in order to examine the issue of change versus continuity in the current era. How do we demarcate historical periods or assess competing claims about historical continuity and discontinuity? Webster's answer is undertaken from the perspective of critical political economy. As he notes, there has been an intriguing shift in analytical emphasis over the last decade from an enthusiasm for technologically driven change to what he calls the "softer sides of information". By this Webster means its *societal* dimensions. He uses this insight to draw a decisive distinction between two antithetical accounts of the notion of an information society. On the one side are those who advance the view that the emergence and novelty of information societies mark a watershed in social development. Among these Webster counts Bell, the most important theorist of the information society as post-industrialism, and Castells, the high priest of the informational mode of development. By contrast, he identifies Schiller, Habermas, *régulation* theorists and, more controversially, Giddens among those who accept that information has taken on a special significance but who stress historical continuities and the impress of the past. In particular, these writers understand "informatisation as the continuation of pre-established patterns". Since Webster clearly places himself in the second camp, *Theories of the Information Society* can be read as an explicit challenge to the exaggerated claims of the informational fundamentalists.

In taking up this challenge Webster raises substantive doubts about the very notion of an informational society. Lying behind this argument is his view that a great deal of what passes for analysis of information is unavoidably technologically determinist—that technology is regarded as the *primary* social dynamic. This has a double effect. Most obviously it imposes a neo-evolutionist oversimplification on complex processes of

continuity and change. At the same time it relegates the social, economic and political dimensions of technological innovation to mere epiphenomena. In refuting this kind of *ex post facto* reasoning, Webster interrogates the "idea" of an information society in an important second chapter. He does so by tracing the ways in which technological innovations, economic growth in the worth of informational activities, changes in occupational structures, the new spatiality of information networks and the media-saturated cultural environment have all been called upon—sometimes interchangeably—to account for what is novel in the current conjuncture. These claims are built on some basic misunderstandings and misconceived notions about precisely what it is about information that makes it so important. Webster's review offers an incisive rebuttal of the vagueness of the operational criteria deployed by writers on IT and their recourse to crude quantitative measures at the expense of a more nuanced and fine-grained qualitative analysis. Unable to come up with anything so mundane as testable means to identify what an "information society" might actually look like, Webster is surely right when he says the information and communications technology appears to be "everywhere—and nowhere too". Most information society theorists have simply jettisoned meaning from their conceptualisations of information. It is a remarkably unscientific and imprecise category to represent an era.

Webster pursues these themes in three long chapters. The first of these deals with Bell who has long substituted the concept "information society" for his celebrated notion of the "post-industrial society". Here he convincingly argues that Bell's neo-evolutionism is profoundly conservative—a universalizing extension of Weber's notion of rationalization—while his privileging of a disjuncted services economy as a primary indicator of a new economy collapses under closer scrutiny. The next chapter, examining an eclectic range of theorists of global restructuring, is rather less satisfying. This is due in good measure to Webster's attempt to conflate too many diverse thinkers into a single analytical *problematique* and, in doing so, he finesses real points of divergence. The major focus here is the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism under the impact of globalization. Necessarily, this brings Webster to an encounter with the influential *régulation* approach pioneered by Michel Aglietta, Robert Boyer and Alain Lipietz but the discussion is disappointingly thin. Apart from a very brief mention of these influential writers, he makes hardly any reference to specifically regulationist contributions to the role of information in underpinning



macroeconomic dynamics and institutional change. In fact, this section feels distinctly second-hand and barely touches on major currents of inquiry—such as new spaces of regulation—that are central to global restructuring. While Webster seeks to move the debate on from a supposed transition from Fordism to post-Fordism—and this is well taken—he never really offers a compelling alternative account of capitalist restructuring. Perhaps one way forward would be greater consideration of the work of David Harvey (mentioned by Webster only in passing) whose ideas on the capitalist production of space and the geography of class power would surely add to the richness and complexity of this important theme.

In a model of brevity and concision, the chapter on Castells is one of the best introductions to the sometimes arcane world of that great social theorist. The quality of the engagement here is not in doubt since Webster has also co-edited a massive three-volume study of Castells due in late 2003.<sup>5</sup> Given that Webster himself calls Castells the “leading commentator of the Information Age”, the attention is perhaps understandable and there are no less than seventeen bibliographical references to his work. The main concern is obviously with Castells’s *Information Age* trilogy (1996–98), a *tour de force* which attempts to lay bare the social and economic dynamics of the information age and offers a highly provocative theory of power and determination.<sup>6</sup> In the best-known volume, *The Rise of the Network Society*, the global economy is characterized by the almost instantaneous flow and exchange of information, capital and communication. These flows order and condition both consumption and production. He describes the accelerating pace of innovation and application, and the processes of globalization that have marginalized and threaten to make redundant people excluded from informational networks. Castells investigates the culture, institutions and organizations of the network society and the concomitant transformation of work and employment. He shows that in the advanced economies production is now concentrated on an educated section of the population to such an extent that many economies can do without a third or more of their people. Castells suggests that the effect of this may not be mass unemployment but the extreme flexibilization of work and individualization of labor, and a highly segmented social structure. Castells concludes by examining the effects and implications of technological change on media culture, “the culture of real virtuality”, on urban life, global politics, and the nature of time. These ideas are then taken up, in *The Power of Identity*, in his account of two conflicting trends: globalization and

identity. The information technology revolution and the restructuring of capitalism have induced the network society that has fundamentally undermined the institutions of civil society upon which the modern democratic order was founded. But alongside the transformation of capitalism and the demise of statism, argues Castells, there has been a powerful surge of expressions of new resistance identities. These identities anchor power in the network society and provide the basis for political contestation. In volume three, *End of Millennium*, Castells examines the macro processes of global social change induced by the interaction between networks and identity. It begins with a study of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its transmogrification into today's "wild capitalism", which traces its demise back to the incapacity of industrial statism to manage the transition to the information age. Castells attempts to demonstrate the rise of inequality, polarization, and social exclusion throughout the world. In addition, he documents the formation of a global criminal economy. He analyzes the political and cultural foundations of the emergence of the Asian Pacific as the most dynamic region in the global economy. And he reflects on the contradictions of the European Union project, and proposes the concept of the lean, de-centered "network state".

On the question of continuity or change, Webster senses that Castells wants it both ways. For while Castells recognizes the long-term prevalence of capitalist relations he insists that informationalism—"the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity"<sup>7</sup>—is creating a "new economy" and a "new society". In this view, the current informational "mode of development" is oriented towards the accumulation of knowledge and higher levels of complexity in information processing. In any case, Castells is unambiguous about his claim that informational networks (and especially network enterprises) are the indispensable harbingers of any future social organization. In another echo of Weber, the "spirit of informationalism" will seize the day. As one would expect, Webster remains profoundly unimpressed: informationalism is looked for and seen everywhere but, ultimately, it is not the key explanatory factor that Castells makes it out to be. Beyond this, Webster's critique focuses on three inter-related shortcomings of Castells's schema. First, Castells's notion of informational labor is both unavoidably technocratic and extraordinarily elastic, leaving it bereft of analytical or explanatory power. Second, Webster casts doubt on the novelty of informational labor,



pointing to the long ascendancy of the "professional society" which belies the meritocratic claims of the network society.

This is then linked to a third, and in some ways the most important, criticism, namely Castells's treatment of class relations and the question of political agency. Castells delivers his analysis by sleight of hand. While he stresses that informational capitalism—the "mode of development" in an echo of his youthful Marxism—is both powerful and pervasive, he also insists that it is a capitalism without an identifiable capitalist class, but rather a "faceless collective capitalist" or perhaps a "managerial class". At the same time, Castells foresees the demise of the working class. Suddenly, capitalism is shorn of its constitutive social relations; the basic structures of property relations, ownership patterns and modes of labor subordination no longer apply; the networking logic trumps the specific social interests expressed through the networks. What this all seems to suggest is that the new times demand new politics. As we have seen, Castells privileges the centrality of new social movements as offering novel forms of political agitation—perhaps even "informational democracy"—appropriate to the networked age. Leaving aside the important empirical point Webster makes elsewhere that it is premature to announce the arrival of a new politics, he does not make nearly enough of the *theoretical* tensions in Castells's analysis beyond the observation that the propertied classes still command.<sup>8</sup> In baldly stating that "the power of flows takes precedence of the flows of power" Castells seems unable to provide a sustainable theory of agency and structure, still less a robust account of social power and its reproduction both distinct from, as well as articulated within the "unseen logic" of the network.

The second part of Webster's book moves firmly onto a terrain that is more congenial to him. It comprises three chapters on Schiller, Habermas and Giddens who are each understood as offering an account of information embedded in continuities from the past. The most valuable, not least because he is regrettably the least known of these thinkers, is the discussion of Schiller. Standing squarely against the information society utopians, his work is notable for its emphasis on the significance of age-old capitalist activities: "contrary to the notion that capitalism has been transcended, long prevailing imperatives of a market economy remain as determining as ever in the transformations occurring in the technological and informational sphere".<sup>9</sup> Since this was written more than twenty years



ago Schiller has considerable claim to be the pioneer of the political economy approach, insisting on the primacy of business imperatives in the realm of information. One of his abiding themes was the danger of corporate takeovers of public institutions and spaces, limiting possibilities of expression, submerging the majority in escapist "infotainment" and dulling the critical imagination. The concept of the public sphere has, of course, long been the centerpiece of Habermas's own theoretical project. Habermas's account of the public sphere is that it is severely constrained in an era of transnational media conglomerates whose informational quality is almost non-existent. Webster then uses these insights to review what has happened to key institutional forms in the modern public sphere—radio and television, public libraries, museums and art galleries, and government information services—and concludes that they have been denuded from within by a generalized assault on public service functions in neoliberal rationality and from without by the pervasiveness of what Schiller calls manipulative "garbage information". There are, of course, grounds for criticizing Habermas's notion of the public sphere as both unnecessarily restrictive in terms of an emancipatory politics and over-reliant on a hyper-rationalist notion of language. Nonetheless, his pessimism about the deleterious effects of information management is well founded.

The same cannot be said, however, of Giddens's position in this debate. Webster's take on Giddens is unfortunately one-dimensional, essentially a summary of earlier writing on "reflexive modernization" and the role of surveillance in the rise of modern nation states. These insights are then taken as a springboard for a useful, though fairly mundane, discussion of the dangers of both state and corporate surveillance and their impact on citizens' rights. What is more surprising is Webster's refusal to engage with Giddens's current political project not, as he would have it, as a leading academic spokesperson for a "progressive center-left" but as an unabashed advocate of neoliberal globalization.<sup>10</sup> This is more than simply unfortunate. By drawing Giddens into "his" side of the debate about the continuities onto which information is inscribed Webster seems, for once, to avert his critical gaze. Webster argues, rightly in my view, that the world remains recognizably *capitalist* for all the changes that have taken place. This remains for him the starting point for understanding the possibilities for any politics of struggle. It is odd, then, that he is unable to offer us a reading of Giddens's current preoccupation to appropriate the values of

social democracy and socialism and invoke them in support of a diametrically opposite agenda, the promotion of the hegemony of neoliberalism.

It would be wrong to end this review of *Theories of the Information Society* on a discordant note. I hope to have shown the huge value of Webster's analysis of a wide range of exciting themes that should be pursued in contemporary social theory. He poses interesting questions of his various interlocutors and arrives at a framework for analysis that can facilitate genuine research and new discoveries. And his conclusion that the global "information society" actually expresses the continuation of long-held capitalist principles—and not their supersession—acquires eloquent confirmation in these pages. After the deluge of technocratic and managerial commentary, "bringing capitalism back in" to the debate on information is a necessary starting-point for developing new directions of enquiry and combining them in a potentially post-disciplinary research project.

The question thus arises as to the future trajectory of research. I would like to conclude by offering two possible avenues. The first has already been signaled by the work of Robert Brenner and others in offering a critique of the chimera of the "new economy" and neoliberal globalization. This view insists that capitalism's expansionary drive is neither the product of some inevitable natural law, nor a recent technological innovation of the "information age". While the intensification of competition has certainly changed the conditions of profitability, the pressure to enhance "flexibility" and "competitiveness" are not the automatic result of some inevitable process, as so many conceptions of globalization seem to suggest. Second, much more needs to be done in relation to the issue of what kind of politics is emerging and what this portends for democratic struggles. On the one hand, the adaptability of capitalism is one of its prime weapons in class struggle. But we should not underestimate the vast swathe of opposition it continues to generate. That opposition is fragmented, often highly localized, and endlessly diverse in terms of aims and methods. The question that then arises is what is the significance of information for generating democratic alternatives and promoting new solidarities. Darin Barney has recently offered a deeply skeptical response to that question, arguing that the use of the new information technologies does not in itself mean that citizens are actually deciding about the shape and course of their

social existence. He doubts, too, that anything like a real, rooted community exists via the internet.<sup>11</sup> More than this, the new information networks are also, and at the same time, structures of capitalist control that channel and coerce people's lives into delimited forms of market dependence. But the critique of technological fixes, as I suggested earlier, should not be the end point but the start of new thinking about possible political alternatives. If much of what passes for globalization and the so-called information society today has emerged from deliberate policy choices in the interests of capital, then just as surely they can also be challenged in theory and practice. ☉

### Endnotes

- 1 Charles Leadbetter, *Living on Thin Air: The New Economy*, London: Viking, 1999.
- 2 David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
- 3 The language of the first wave theorists of the "information revolution" is redolent of conventional analyses of earlier industrial transformations; see, for example, David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, Ch.1.
- 4 Frank Webster, *The New Photography: Responsibility on Visual Communication*, London, Calder, 1980; Frank Webster and Kevin Robbins, *Information Technology: A Luddite Analysis*, Norwood NJ: Ablex, 1986.
- 5 Frank Webster and Basil Dimitriou, eds, *Manuel Castells*, 3 vols., London: Sage, 2003.
- 6 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Vol. 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*. Vol. 2 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997; Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium*. Vol. 3 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- 7 Castells, *Network Society*, p. 17.
- 8 Frank Webster, "A new politics?", in Frank Webster, ed., *Culture and Politics in the Information Age: A New Politics?*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 10.
- 9 Herbert I. Schiller, *Who knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500*, Norwood NJ: Ablex, 1981.



- 10 Anthony Giddens, ed., *The Progressive Manifesto: New Ideas for the Centre-left*, Cambridge:Polity Press, 2003.
- 11 Darin Barney, *Prometheus Wired: the Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology*, Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2000.