

IDENTITY, STRUCTURE AND IDEOLOGY - Manuel Castells' contribution to the identity policy discussion

Markku Valtanen

Abstract: In this presentation I represent Manuel Castells' view on social structure and identity-based agency in the age of informational capitalism. Castells' most significant contribution to the identity policy discussion is in situating various forms of collective identities in the context of social institutions which enables him to depict the internal dynamics of identity-based social mobilization in the network society. I introduce a new reading of Castells' identity typology in which the internal dynamics of identity forms is understood as dilemmas framed by various kinds of structural conditions. I argue that in the information age ideology critique has to focus on assessing the role of global social structures for collective identification processes as well as forms of social enclosures that collective identity formation may induce.

Keywords: identity policy, information society, Manuel Castells, structure and agency, ideology

Manuel Castells is a contemporary Catalanian-Spanish sociologist who at the turn of the millennium became well known in the academic world but also among the general public with his trilogy 'The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture'¹. In 'The Information Age' Castells delineates a holistic theory about almost everything that occurs on the Earth and using an extensive amount of empirical data manages to create an interesting vision of the world during the second half of the last century and the world that is emerging in front of our very eyes. It is a vision of global information capitalism, its consequences, and peoples' reactions to it. An attempt to write this kind of global social theory sounds almost dangerously holistic, but Castells reminds the reader that the historical and cultural context has to be carefully taken into account when analyzing anything in any particular country or region.

Castells' thoughts can be made easier to access by crystallizing his vision into a certain ideal type of the current society. This ideal type as such does naturally not exist anywhere, but it might help in visualizing the most dominant processes in contemporary global change. The ideal type certainly emphasizes the role of Western and Modernized countries in global processes, but this is not a fault of the description, it is a fault of the reality.

Castells is an empiricist who explicitly refrains from making ethical or political deliberations in his trilogy. Therefore I am aware of the

danger of drifting away from Castells' original intentions and unduly writing my own thoughts into the theory. But he who wishes to bridge the empirical and the conceptual has to take this risk.

In my research I take Castells' description of contemporary globalization as granted and I am not going to challenge the empirical adequacy of his theory. Castells' vision of global information capitalism is a usable starting point because it comprises several theoretical ingredients of contemporary sociology, so, at least implicitly, studying Castells' trilogy is the same as having a look at a wider range of mainstream social thought.

The trilogy does not introduce new theoretical inventions - its contribution is in the holistic vision it creates of the contemporary world - so most of its theoretical ingredients that I will briefly present in the following are quite familiar to us all. Or, what might one say to the thought that the modern era is coming to its end and a new era, post-, high or late modern, is beginning; or the thought that the post-industrial era is essentially different from its predecessor, the industrial era? Most of us also accept the notion that the age of hierarchies is over, and the network is becoming the dominant form of social organization; or the notion that the world can no longer be understood as fixed areas, but as flows that transcend territorial borders. Many of us might buy the argument that globalization is not only a process of the world becoming one, but also a process that gives the process of localization a new meaning. Many are politically worried by the fact that the global economical order resembles more and more an automaton that is governed or controlled by no democratic collective actor and that the core functions of the global economy, financial trade being the paradigmatic example here, are now being operated on some abstract, placeless global information network somewhere high above our heads, in real time and simultaneously in every part of the world.

Castells' vision of the societal structure in the age of global information capitalism is, in a nutshell, that we are being transferred from the Modern age into an age of information society or 'informationalism' that is characterized by a specific societal ideal type: the network society. The network society emerges when the information technology revolution meets the age-old network form of social organization. These two then, largely in the 70s and '80s, wake the financial capital from its industrial stagnation. Financial capital no longer remains in the vats that the capitalistic states had prepared for it, rather, it bursts out of them and begins to flow between and over the states and regions, and in the space between them. These flows constitute the architecture of the new global world economy, incomparably beneficial for some and disdainfully ignorant or antagonistic to many. To use a metaphor, this global world system is ascending above the local social sphere becoming more and more an independent and autonomous structural

entity that is controlled by nobody alone, not even the individual capitalists or the managerial class operating their finances, nor even the most powerful capitalist states of the world. As a timeless and placeless, but nonetheless influential, structure it constitutes an adversarial pole for the sphere of human experience and meaning, 'the self' that is inherently tied into local and historical contexts, that is: culture and memory. Given that for Castells the information age is characterized by a dominance of social structure over the human agent, it is legitimate to say that in his vision Weber's iron cage of instrumental rationality has assumed global dimensions, or, that in it Marcuse's and Habermas' theses of the one-dimensionalizing tendencies in contemporary society and the system colonializing the life-world are getting updated to the epoch of global informational capitalism.²

Using a similar size nutshell, Castells' vision of the social agency, as an analytic counterpart for the social structure, in the age of informationalism can be expressed with words identity, identity policy and new social movements. The social actors of the modern era were above all else those that were unified, firstly, by similar socio-economic position and role in the capitalistic production system - that is: labourers, labour movement, trade-union movement, interest and pressure groups, individual owners of the productive means, secondly, by participation in the negotiation and power struggle in civil society³, the heart of democratic nation-states of the modern era.⁴ Now, after the modern era, in the network society primacy is given to a different kind of category of social agency - identity and identity-based movements. Identification as such, is, of course, a-historical and a universal socio-psychological phenomenon but in the network society that phenomenon rises to the centre of social change and change-making. This, argues Castells, is the true meaning of the primacy of identity politics in the network society.

Hence we have the social structure, that is, global information capitalism and its core institutions, and the social agency, that is, identity and identity-based movements. My question is, how does the structure frame the agency in the age of informationalism and what in that framework could most fruitfully be scrutinized from a perspective of ideology theory and critique?

I will begin by describing the internal antagonisms of the network society. Social exclusion does not disappear but it will have a different form. The ethical basic structure of the network society is based on exclusion and inclusion. Socio-economic exclusion results from falling out of the networks of information, wealth and power. This applies to individuals and groups, or regions and continents alike. As to the individuals, the excluded are most often those whose work can be replaced with other

workers or machines. As to the continents the most excluded region on the global network economy seems to be sub-Saharan Africa.

But there are also other kinds of antagonisms in the network society, whose origin is less in contemporary processes, but in what contemporary processes bring to the centre of the social scene. For Castells patriarchy is a primary example of these oppressive structures that stigmatise individuals, that is, women and homosexual men, negatively, by excluding them as 'the others'. These forms of exclusion, exclusion from wealth, and exclusion from recognition or dignity have a third major category of antagonism alongside them: the disintegration of social meaning that perhaps translates into meaning in the social, or sources of meaningfulness of life in society. In Castells' line of thought this follows from the eradication of the temporal and spatial bindings to the historical and cultural contexts that people live in. The eradication succeeds the rationalistic and one-dimensional condition that is left behind when they the timeless and placeless global turbulences blow through the sphere of locality. The image of the human that Castells seemingly has adopted from American ego-psychology holds that an individual is unable to continue her life in a constant vacuum of meaning and that she will have to acquire the experience of meaningfulness by organizing the cultural material that happens to be available to her.⁵ These antagonisms, according to Castells, trigger specific kinds of identity-formation processes whose momenti, trajectories and outcomes largely determine the destiny of the social agency in the network society.

As to the framework in which the identities emerge and function in the network society it is essential to have a look at the framework in which the agencies in the modern era were generated and were placed to act. Castells argues that the age of civil society is over. The dominant global processes have entailed a withering sovereignty of the nation-state. The same processes have unseated the civil society from the centre of the state. They do not disappear or even lose their influence, but their sovereignty they no longer have. There are still people that struggle for, and use, the power of the state for various goals, both democratic and progressive, and identify themselves as agents of, and within, civil society. This category of identity supports the institution with the legitimation that it requires, hence the term legitimation identity in Castells' parlance. The legitimation identity, however, fails to solve its dilemma: the democratic and progressive values that this identity tries to transfer from modernity to the age of informationalism threaten to wilt if, simultaneously, it is not recognized that the world around them has changed profoundly. The tragedy of this identity lies in the contradiction between the goals and the means: the nation-state centred means do not seem sufficient to reach and meet the goals that the unreachable global processes inflict and reveal.

That is why Castells directs his empirical analysis elsewhere, to the back alleys of the society, and what he finds there is imprints of grass root level collective identity formation that does not mobilize itself within the civil society, but is materialized as community-building. These communes bring together the excluded, the stigmatized and the anguished to gain a collective experience that gathering around a common meaning can offer. What is characteristic to the commune-building in the network society is, however, certain resistance against the surrounding society and against other communes. This gives the name for this second identity category: a resistance category. Symptomatic to these communes that tend to form around some primary source of meaning, a cultural singularity, a kind of symbol or flag, is that they cannot genuinely communicate with the social reality around them. Yes - chauvinist militias, fundamentalist satellite preachers, jihadist Quran school scholars, men's movements seeking to restore the patriarchal gender roles - they do preach, but they do not negotiate, as there is nothing to negotiate about 'the Truth', written with a capital initial.

It seems to me that the dilemma of resistance-identities follows from the fact that an exodus to the communes also collapses the horizon of rational social meaning. It can be thought that this horizon is reconstructed within the communes but in an imaginary setting: a communalized self surrounded by an antagonistic external social reality and ideologically flawed other communities. This kind of worldview is forced into a constant ritual strengthening and reproducing of itself as it constantly has to supersede the goals of its individual members in favour of 'the Goal' of the commune.

The resistance identity may be the most influential identity category of our times, and nothing guarantees, writes Castells, that our societies would not stop and stay in their fragmentarilism and tribalism. Many important processes from the perspective of social transformation, however, take place in the communes. It should not be forgotten that they give a possibility for people with similar kinds of social experience to process their thoughts towards new social utopias and strategies. But, in order to metamorphose from a resistance into a project that can transform society they have to be able to extrapolate something from their identity into the surrounding society. What is needed for a collective to open up and become a force that starts transforming the surrounding society? When scanning the globe Castells has also encountered identity mobilization that even though originating from the grass-root communes has been able to transform into something else. What are the conditions of this happening, is the biggest question of our times, writes Castells. As an empiricist he does not give a full answer to this, but he does sketch out some outlines to it.

The first outline that Castells seems to draw is related to the social structure. In a network society the condition of successful social mobilization is the ability to adapt its operational principles and internal logic. A commune is such a form of social organization that has little chances to succeed in expanding its experience to the society at large if it does not itself, at least to some extent, network and turn into a network. This is a prerequisite not only for cooperating with other same-minded communes, but also for seizing certain strategic capabilities. One of the most important of these capabilities is to operate in the virtualized media reality of the network society in order to get your message through. Another is to acquire necessary technocratic instrumental knowledge that is necessary in operating in the technology-mediated world. The power in the network society is namely more and more diffused into the architecture of the network, in its nodes that function as switches for the flows of information, wealth, ideas, images, etc., than what it was during the modern era, when in order to acquire power, the social actors had to struggle over positions in hierarchical organizations.

The communes have to metamorphose into networks. This is the structural condition of the project identities, a third identity category in Castells' typology. But the condition is an ambiguous one, namely, when acquiring the capabilities to operate in the network society they may simultaneously adopt its technocratic and instrumental logic into part of their own goals. Medium becomes the message and if the spirit of the initial opponent becomes part of the goals of the new subjects of the network society we may witness another victory of Habermas' system over the life-world.⁶ So, part of the dilemma of the project-identity seems to be to avoid compromising too much when trying to introduce alternatives to the society. Otherwise they are in danger of being turned into mirror images of their initial opponents.

Additional to the structural conditions, the project identities may also have some substantial prerequisites, that is, something that relates to the symbolic contents of the identity movements. Traditionally in the identity policy discussion certain left-progressive movements have been considered as those who will be successful in mobilizing themselves and realizing their goals. Castells rightly considers this as a loaded assumption and he contributes to the identity policy discussion by expanding the concept of identity movement into several right-conservative movements. If the categorization into reactive and proactive movements cannot be made from a political perspective without stepping down from the objective observers' position, can it be made from some other perspective? The final answer cannot be read from Castells' trilogy, but some implicit suggestions do exist there. It seems to me that in order to transform the social structure the project identity has to transform its symbolic content into a communicable form. As

noted earlier, for strengthening and expanding a commune of the same-minded it suffices to preach, but for changing the society the meaning has to be negotiated. We may ask what kind of possibilities resistance-identities that have reacted to the eradication of social meaning by essentializing their core values and projecting them into a social, biological or theological transcendence, as it is in the case of nationalism, racism, patriarchalism or fundamentalism. These forms of thought cannot turn from a resistance into a project without yielding up their assumptions of strong philosophical realism. The internal condition would thus seem to possess a paradox: in order to transform the society, giving up the absolutism of the meaning is a necessity. From an individual this requires psychological courage, and from a commune perhaps its partial dissolution.

I would continue from here by suggesting that resistance-identity also has to undergo a certain deconstruction to be transformed into a project-identity. Tentatively, I consider identity always including at least two components: first the experience of the social antagonisms that initially triggered its mobilization into a commune, and second, an understanding or view of the social conditions or prerequisites behind that antagonism. In the resistance-identity the first one, the experience, seems to be privatized into some kind of intra-collective property that I call here 'victim's identity'. This experience does not unravel as long as the collective needs it to reproduce itself. The second one seems, in the resistance-identity, be absent along with the general collapse of the rational horizon. The resistance-identity seems to recognize the social antagonism solely as an experience and is unable to integrate it to any kind of rational explanation of its condition.

Where to focus then to find the right rational explanation of the ideological condition in our times? I think that on the basis of Castells vision it is fair to say that if in the modern age the ideology critique had to take a stance towards the role of the state in capitalism, in the network society the focus has to be on the global level capitalist automaton and the deepening schizophrenia between it and the local level human experience. It also has to be on the ways people give away their social subject-hood when turning in to communal and rational enclosures as excluded, exploited, stigmatized or anguished by the antagonisms of our times.

From a perspective of ideology critique - and I understand this vantage point very broadly here - this translates perhaps best into a concept of misrecognition. A privatized experience, victim's identity, and failing to interpret social conditions in any other way than 'us' versus the antagonistic society will hinder any exchange and mutual sharing of experience between subjects. The same tragedy takes place also when the resistance-identities misrecognize each other as their own social conditions,

instead of recognizing a fellow subject encountering the same antagonisms of the same global information capitalism in each other. This, for one, would be a prerequisite for a genesis of any kind of genuine social solidarity in the age of informationalism.

¹ Castells 1996-2000b. First volume of Castells' trilogy 'The Network Society' can broadly speaking be taken as narration of the globalizing social structure, whereas the second volume 'The Power of Identity' presents Castells' ideas on the social agency. Third volume is merely a collection of studies in which Castells applies the viewpoints of the previous volumes to various topics. For Castells' clarification of the theoretical background assumptions in his trilogy, see Castells 2000c.

² Calhoun 2000, 37.

³ Castells follows largely Antonio Gramsci's understanding of the concept. For a critique of Castells' way to use the concept, see Calabrese 1999, 178-83.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the subject-matter, see Carnoy & Castells 2001.

⁵ Bendle 2002, 4-17.

⁶ Waterman 1999, 370-1.

Bibliography

Bendle, Mervyn F. "The Crisis of 'Identity' in High Modernity", *British Journal of Sociology*, 53(1): 1-18, 2002.

Calabrese, Andrew. "The Information Age According to Manuel Castells", *Journal of Communication*, 49(3): 172-186, 1999.

Calhoun, Craig. "Resisting Globalization or Shaping It?" *Prometheus*, 3: 28-47, 2000.

Carnoy, Martin & Castells, Manuel. "Globalization, the knowledge society, and the Network State: Poulantzas at the millennium", *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, 1 (1), 1-18, 2001.

Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. Vol. 1, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). Vol. 2, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed. (2000a). Vol. 3, *End of Millennium*, 2nd ed. (2000b), Oxford: Blackwell, 1996-2000b.

Castells, Manuel. "Materials for an Explanatory Theory of the Network Society", *British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1): 5-24, 2000c.

Waterman, Peter. "The Brave New World of Manuel Castells: What on Earth (or in the Ether) is Going On?", *Development and Change*, 30(2): 357-380, 1999.

About the author

Markku Valtanen, MTh, BA, is a research student of social ethics in the University of Helsinki and is preparing a doctoral dissertation on global informational capitalism.