

Manuel Castells

COMMUNICATION POWER

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communication
power



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This event marks the launch of Professor Manuel Castells' latest book, *Communication Power*, in which he analyses the transformation of the global media industry by the revolution in communication technologies. He argues that a new communication system, mass self-communication, has emerged, and power relationships have been profoundly modified by the emergence of this new communication environment.

PROGRAMME

- 17h00–17h30 : Drinks and snacks served in the lobby
- 17h30–18h00 : Welcome
- 18h00–18h30 : Introduction to *Communication Power* by Manuel Castells
- 18h30–19h00 : Questions and comments

Manuel Castells lecture at the London School of Economics on COMMUNICATION POWER [9 July 2009]

On Thursday, 9 July, I attended an LSE public lecture given by legendary sociologist Manuel Castells, and chaired by Robin Mansell (LSE chair of New Media and the internet). The lecture focussed on Castells' new book, *Communication Power*, which Castells has worked on for the last eight years building on his earlier work on the network society, media and the internet, bringing in ideas of power relationships and extending them to networks.

In thinking about power, Castells delineates two approaches to using power for social control: the capacity to use violence against the body, and the capacity to use violence against the mind. The second of these is communication power and, according to Castells, this the decisive form of power... Castells describes four key stages in the transformation of communication in the digital age:

1. *Organisational transformation*: The transformation of media to the current multi-mediabusinessmodel represents

the heart of the system. These multinationals have an incredible level of resources, capital and power but are also decentralised to fit into the diverse world that they inform.

2. *Technological transformation*: The digitisation of communication, through elements such as internet and wireless, has led to the rise in mass-communication, including mass-self-communication, moving the communication paradigm from one to many, to many to many. Technological transformations have led to the increasing abundance of horizontal networks of communication, which puts an interesting spin on the relationship between 1 and 2.

3. *Cultural transformation*: The audience has developed out of being a passive object, content to receive information, to intervening in the relationship with the media. Which leads to:

4. *The New Creative Audience*: An audience which creates and controls what it wants to see through interaction with the mass-media system.

Communication networks are critical to Castells because they define the real-world networks of people through persuasion. Finally he identifies four forms of power:

1. *Networking power*: the power of inclusion and exclusion from a network.
2. *Network power*: Whoever sets the standards/rules has power over those using the network.
3. *Net-work power*: Some actors (nodes) work harder than others and have more connections and more scope to impose their opinion (but under the constraints of network power).
4. *Network-making power*: People (although more usually networks of people) who can programme the creation and joining of networks

in order to augment information sharing.

For Castells network-making power is the key element, and focuses not only on 'programming the network' – making networks happen – but also, fundamentally, on switching. Switchers are people who can switch between different networks, political networks, media networks, cultural and industrial networks etc, and in doing so hold huge amounts of power towards access. Thus, he says the old politics of centralised power are gone because even the most powerful people in a network need partnership with others in other networks to fully exploit their situation.

Castells ended the lecture by saying that communications in general, particularly new-media and creative audiences have a huge potential power to construct visions of life and society within the mind.

– Abridged and edited version of an article by Daniel J Lewis, PhD Student at University College London (UCL) Department of Geography <http://danieljlewis.org/2009/07/11/manuel-castells-lse-communication-power/>

PROFILE: Theorist of power

John Higgins*
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Born in 1942 into the repressive society that was Franco's Spain, Manuel Castells - the leader of a radical student movement in Barcelona - had to flee the country at the age of 20 and completed his studies in the heady atmosphere of New Wave Paris. Come May 1968, when students joined workers in an attempt to bring down the government, Castells was at the barricades. Come 2009, he is one of the world's leading social theorists, consulted by governments for his understanding of global trends in communication and economy, and dividing his time between academic appointments in Los Angeles, Barcelona and Oxford. His latest book, *Communication Power*, has just been published.

"People sometimes say that 1968 was a failed revolution," he said at the launch of the new study at Cape Town's Centre of the Book. "But not me. The world has been and continues to be profoundly shaped by the ideas that were articulated in the 1960s. Just look at the continuing effects of feminism and non-racialism. The world has changed since 1968, and - in positive part at least - this is because of 1968."

It is Castells' fine focus on the interactions between two dimensions of change in the world - changes happening in and to the economic base, and related shifts in and possibilities for political understanding and agency - that lends his work its unusual reach and authority, making it a crucial point of reference for any understanding of the contemporary world.

Indeed, in his commitment to the discipline of fact, and his extraordinary command of the workings of the world economy, he resembles the Karl Marx of *Capital*. What *Capital* was for the 19th century, Castells' great trilogy, *The Information Age*, is for the present. This despite his own considerable scepticism towards what the 20th century made of the Marxist project ("an ideological, a religious discussion").

While *Capital* presented a coherent guide to the emerging structures of industrial capitalism, and provided a compelling overview of the economic and social dynamics of industrial society, Castells' *The Information Age* puts forward an equally compelling portrait of the new global network society, and a convincing account of how it emerged from developments within information technology and its deployment.

For Castells, the network society has superseded industrial society, and social and political understanding must come to terms with this fact if it is to achieve anything of substance in terms of nourishing either public policy or insurgent politics.

In *Communication Power*, he focuses more tightly on the concrete workings of power within the global network society, and the new forms of both manipulation and intervention enabled by new information technologies.

With (among others) its case studies of the attempted suppression of internet access in China, the slow emergence of green politics as a global force, the emergence of scandal politics in late democracies, and the analysis of the Barack Obama presidential primary campaign, Castells brings an increasingly sophisticated theoretical apparatus to bear on a wealth of empirical data.

We spoke in Cape Town about the new book and, particularly, its place in his ongoing intellectual trajectory. I asked Castells first about the book's dedication to the memory of Marxist theorist Nicos Poulantzas, who committed suicide in 1972, and its very strong framing of Poulantzas as "my brother, theorist of power".

First, Castells noted the obvious fact that with *Communication Power* he had turned directly to the main object of Poulantzas' own work: the analysis of the substance of power, explored in such compelling studies as *Political Power and Social Classes* and Poulantzas' final book *State, Power, Socialism*. At the same time, he explained, in a voice strong with emotion, Poulantzas "has always been in my memory as my brother".

Both were radical exiled students in Paris' elite academic milieu, attending Louis Althusser's famous seminars at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but never feeling completely accepted in that circle. "I never met Althusser personally," he noted, and besides, his work was that of a philosopher rather than a social theorist.

"I was never attracted to him and his concepts because they were so - well, not just abstract, because there is useful abstraction as well as useless abstraction - but I could never do anything with his concepts," Castells recollected: "I was always more interested in actual social movements than in philosophy."

As for Poulantzas, a fellow immigrant academic: "We were both in a sense outsiders," and, in that estrangement "we were really like brothers, discussing everything together, including personal matters, working together, doing all kinds of things together... We both had a long intellectual trip trying to see what we could do with Marxism, and what we could not do.

"I waited a long time to have a book that was good enough for his memory. I think this one has an intellectual effort behind it that brings it up to the level of intellectual excellence I wanted to associate with Poulantzas. It took me many, many years - in fact 35 years - to have a good enough book on power. This is it."

The striking innovation that *Communication Power* brings to Castells' previous analyses and to the well-established field of political communication, is its integration and deployment of new research and hypotheses in neuroscience, associated particularly with the work of Antonio Damasio, author of the notable *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. I asked him how he had first come across this body of work, so apparently remote from his own discipline.

"Well," he replied wryly, "first of all I came across him, as he works just across the hall in my university. So that made things easier." The two sought each other out, and began a series of conversations that ultimately bore fruit in the new book, and Castells' contention that only an "interdisciplinary scientific perspective" will enable us to "move from description to explanation" in the understanding of human power relationships.

"I had one problem in the book," he explained. "People make their decisions and actively engage in struggles, but that at the same time they are conditioned by their communication environment, and their subjectivity in part depends on the signals they receive from it. This I knew and I would even say it's obvious. We think in a communications dialogue and not by ourselves. And this is perhaps particularly so in a society in which communications are pervasive. My problem was to link the communication environment and human practice, including human political practice."

"Talking to Damasio," he continued, "I started to see the connection better, and discovered that one of the most important trends in political communication and political science is what is called affective

intelligence. This really promises to reconstruct the whole idea of politics in terms of how people process their emotions. Empirically it shows how emotions are the key determinant in how people behave socially and act politically."

At the core of this new interdisciplinary perspective is the way in which the theory of affective intelligence insists that - far from being opposites, or logical alternatives, as traditional understanding has it - emotional appeal and rational choice are complementary mechanisms in the process of political decision-making.

And here (in one of the most fascinating of the book's empirical studies) the strong sense that emotion comes before rationality does much to explain the otherwise inexplicable fact of how and why so many Americans continued to believe in the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq long after rational proof of their non-existence had been visibly and publicly available. As the book has it, "information per se does not alter attitudes unless there is an extraordinary level of cognitive dissonance".

With deployment of the idea of affective intelligence, it may well be that Castells has found the long-lost bridge between the two explanatory dimensions of structure and agency that are usually posed as alternatives in social and political theory, and particularly so when it comes to the questions of power and resistance that interested both Marx and Poulantzas.

That, properly understood, the force of human agency arises precisely from within the constraints of structure is perhaps the main lesson that emerges from the book, and is usefully exemplified in the very fine analysis of the Barack Obama campaign that brings it to a close.

"How was he [Obama] able to mobilise support for his unlikely candidacy?" asks the book, and what are the lessons of his campaign for the understanding of insurgent politics in the Internet Age? A part of the answer - and the study provides several additional dimensions of explanation - can be found in what the theory of affective intelligence can tell us about the role of communication in the political process.

In brief, concludes Castells, the Obama campaign's success was based on "its capacity to incorporate new political actors in large numbers and stimulate their active participation". Hillary Clinton "dismissed Obama's superior rhetorical capacity as being 'just words'", but words did in fact prove to matter very much.

At the core of Obama's campaign message were the words hope and change. Though the campaign emphasised that change (always threatening, in affective intelligence terms) was needed, "hope was the driving emotion". Obama's constant appeal to hope helped to mobilise tremendous levels of popular support since - as cognitive science has recognised and stressed - hope is par excellence the emotion that "stimulates enthusiasm for a candidate".

All in all, with provocative theoretical assertions backed up by its rich and fascinating case studies, *Communication Power* is a book no one interested in the dynamics of contemporary political reality should ignore. And that means all of us.

Despite Castells' reservations concerning orthodox Marxism, *Communication Power* may well stand as the contemporary counterpart to Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon: a pioneering study in both the semiotics of power and the power of semiotics produced at a moment in which the "tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living".

* John Higgins is Andrew W Mellon Research Professor in the Archives and Public Culture project at the University of Cape Town.