

Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives
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Lecture 32
Manuel Castells: Time of Flows

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Manuel Castells: Time of
Flows

Felix Stalder



Welcome back to the class again, this is a continuation of the previous class where we are using the material or the book by Felix Stalder, an academic who has written on Castells's work on network society and in the previous class we discussed Castells's arguments about spaces of flows. So, he makes a very tall claim about the emergence of a new material basis for our time sharing which is significantly altering the spaces of places.

So, I hope you understood it correctly, he is not saying that the spaces of flows is replacing the spaces of places, but it is altering their significance.

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- If Castells's current conception of space is implicitly Leibnizian, his conception of time is explicitly so. For Leibniz, in close analogy to space, there is no absolute, infinite time because "instants apart from things are nothing and they only consist in the successive order of things."
- In other words, time is sequence. The sequence of events is what creates time, and the historically determined way of how this sequence is ordered constitutes the social character of time.
- The cyclical temporality of Middle Ages and a linear one of modernity
- In Lewis Mumford's classic formulation, "the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours, but of synchronizing the actions of men." Clock time became the dominant social temporality, making possible notions such as punctuality, hourly wage, saving and wasting time, and the strict separation of past, present, and future.



Now, we know that any theory on space is incomplete without the theory on time, because both are so, co-constitutive of each other. So, in this class we will look at, very briefly, his arguments about, how he understands the fundamental transformation taking place in time. So, if Castells's current conception of space is temporally Leibnizian, his conception of time is explicitly so, we mentioned that how Castells had a, been heavily influenced by Leibniz of German philosopher who had a relational understanding of space. So, for Leibniz in close analogy to space, there is no absolute infinity time because instances apart from things are nothing and they only consist in the successive order of things. So, in other words, time is sequence.

The sequence of events is what creates time and the historically determined ways of, see, Leibniz's argument is something very similar to that of his argument about space. Remember, he argued that space happens only between things. Only if you have two people or two objects exist only then you will be able to talk space as existing between these two entities. If there are nothing, then you cannot think of a space because space does not make any sense.

Similarly, Leibniz argued that, in a more philosophically profound way, time happens only between sequence, only between events. The difference between event A and event B is what is understood as a time. So, this event has to have certain kind of a sequence and this sequence is what provides us with a larger understanding about the notions of temporality, temporality or larger understanding about time.

Now, when we talk about this is the second, this is the month of December 2020 and next year is 2021 that means, there is something called as the CE, there is BC, there this AD. So, there is, you can talk about BC 2000, you can talk about BC 4000, you can talk about BC 10,000, you can also talk about 10,000 as in the future. So, you have a linear understanding of time and this temporality is understood as things have happening between sequence.

So, in other words time is sequence, the sequence of events is what creates time. And historically determined way of how the sequence is ordered constitute the social character time. So, what is the social character of time is something very interesting. So, how do we make sense of this sequence? And that is what Stalder has a very interesting or lengthy discussion about say different types of temporalities.

For example, he talks about the cyclical temporality of the Middle Ages and the linear one of the modernity. In the pre modern societies, most of the time you understood a time as forming in cycles, because they very closely observed the nature there are different seasons, there are different seasons and even every day, there is a sunrise, then there is noon, then the sunset and there is night and again it gets repeated or when you look at the yearly scheme of affairs, scheme of things, there are different seasons. So, the winter gets repeated after a particular period. So, in most of the pre modern period, the most socially constructed temporality was cyclical.

So, they understood this cycle, it keeps on repeating, unendingly and in between some people die and above that there was a more divine understanding of a linear time. So that is why there was the whole idea of the end of the world. And then, the whole world will be destroyed and will be the flood and then, different religions had such kind of the final day of Judgment.

So, there was a larger understanding of linear time, but their everyday life was heavily influenced by this kind of a cyclical temporality. But that was significantly changed with that of modernity, where you understand that we are a part of a larger historical time we are in 1800, or 1900, we are in 2020, it means that we are able to visualize the future, we are able to visualize the past.


Now, in this larger scheme of things, technology plays a very important role. The clocks play a very important role, your calendar played very important role. Your sirens play very important role. And you know that when you talk about the rise of industrialism, rise of industrialization, rise of factories, sound of sirens, it had a tremendous organizing impact on the everyday lives of people.

Because you are supposed to start your work at a given siren, they are supposed to end it and then you are supposed to have your food, you get some 30 or 40 minutes. Again, with the sound of a siren, you are supposed to resume your work, only to end your work after 3 or 4 hours with the sound of a siren again.

So, in Lewis Mumford's classic formulation, the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours but are synchronizing the actions of men. So, we all look at the watch now, we all look at the watch and then we reorganize the thing and maybe I am sure that all of you must have realized how this pandemic COVID has completely disrupted our dependency over time and over days. Weekdays and holidays hardly making had hardly made any distinction during our lockdown period, things are now coming back to normalcy.

So, clock time became the dominant social temporality making possible notions such as punctuality, hourly wage, saving and wasting time and the strict separation of past, present and future. So, the clock time if it is defined, if it determined your day-to-day activities, the calendar defined your understanding of what is present, what was the previous month, what is the next month and what is the next year, what was the previous year. So, it actually provided you with a kind of a particular kind of socially constructed sense of temporality.

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- Castells argues that cyclical and linear temporalities have in common that they establish relatively predictable sequences.
 - Indeed, it is this very ordering of events into sequences that establishes the relational notion of time in the first place. Under the influence of informationalism, the predictable sequence of events is being disturbed in an increasing number of areas, from the natural to the cultural, from the individual to the collective.
 - If time is sequence, and informationalism reorganizes events into instances without meaningful sequence, then time itself is being called into question. This is what Castells means by "timeless time," the "systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena".



Castells argues that the cyclical and linear temporalities have in common that they establish a relatively predictable sequence. This is the most important, fascinating and yet controversial point that Castells is bringing it. So, he is saying that whether it is the cyclical or biological or, linear temporality, we all were able to predict sequences. They we are all familiar, we knew that in a cyclical thing, one season will follow the other one and then autumn will come, then spring will come, we knew that.

And in linear thing also, we knew that, how our predictions were clear, we were able to predict, we were able to visualize. Indeed, it is this very ordering of events into sequence that establish the relational notion of time in the first place.

Under the influence of informationalism, he says that in the era of globalization, especially with the arrival of technology, both technology about the internet, and then other things, and then biotechnology, this predictable sequence of events is being disturbed in an increasing number of areas from the natural to the cultural, from the individual to the collective.

So, this is the basic argument that he is talking about. This informationalism, it is actually disturbing our ability to predict things, it is really disturbing our ability to be comfortable with a particular temporality. Because this informationalism does not have any bias towards any particular temporality. If time is a sequence and informationalism reorganizes events into instances without meaningful sequence, then time itself is being called into question.

This is what Castells means by timeless time, the systematic perturbation in the sequential ordering of phenomena. So, again this is a point which has not been convinced by many people, just not convinced many scholars, so every scholar is skeptical about it. But the argument is that informationalism has really disturbed the sequence of events.

It has completely disturbed the sequence of events, there are events of course, but these sequence of events are quite unpredictable. So, that is that particular situation, Castells use the term timeless time to indicate that. It does not mean the lack of events or absence of events, it only says that a predictable sequence becomes impossible, you do not know what to expect. You do not know what to expect even in your personal life in your cultural life, your natural life in your social or collectivity this becomes impossible.

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- The idea is that the production of time, contrary to the classic Newtonian concept, is itself a historical process. Time is constructed in time.
- What is new, Castells suggests, is that there is no longer a dominant temporality, neither traditional biological time, nor modern clock time, nor any of the others. The cumulative effect of the interaction of multiple temporalities, without reference to a dominant one, is a chaotic fluctuation in the sequence of events. Society as a whole, so runs Castells's thesis, has lost its ability to establish a reliable pattern of sequence in relation to which individual and collective actors can organize themselves; hence they are forced to embark on the hazardous project of establishing their own temporality.




Now how does he, what kind of evidences does he give that. The idea that the production of time contrary to the classic Newtonian concept is itself a historical process, time is constructed in in time, this is something again, similar to something that we have already discussed. Similar to that of space, time is also a product of history. It is constructed historically it is constructed, what is new?

What is new? Castells suggests that there is no longer a dominant temporality. Unlike the cyclical period in the medieval period and linear temporality in the modern period, there is no longer a dominant temporality neither traditional biological time nor modern clock time, nor any others. The cumulative effect of the interaction of multiple temporalities without reference to dominant one is a chaotic fluctuation in the sequence of events.

Society as a whole, so runs Castells's thesis has lost its ability to establish a reliable pattern of sequence in relation to which individuals and collective actors can organize themselves. Hence, they are forced to embark on the hazardous project of establishing their own temporality. So, this is to repeat the earlier argument, that there is no dominant temporality.

This informationalism has brought in quite a lot of alternative temporalities where you as an individual, as well as a collectivity is unable to depend on a dominant temporality, thereby it becomes quite chaotic, and individually you are forced to create your own sense of temporality. And how does he argue that, we will look into that.

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- A shattering of predictable sequences into an order whose logic can only be established after the fact – in a wide range of areas, for a large number of people – would indeed be a different social experience, compared to time seen as an orderly succession of things.
 - Castells suggests, flexible work destroys the linearity of work time, in the sense that working hours and working time are no longer conforming to the regimented linear time of the factory, but also not returning to anything even loosely resembling a cycle. Time is no longer an objective category, but managed as a resource “with reference to the temporality of other firms, networks, processes and products.”



A shattering of predictable sequence into an order, whose logic can only be established after the fact, in a wide range of areas, for a large number of people would indeed be different social experience, compared to time seen as an orderly succession of things. This is what he explains, a shattering of a predictable sequence in an order where logic can only be established after the fact.

So, we do not know what to expect. So, the logic happens, or logic becomes evident, the reason, its rationale, its explanation becomes evident only after an instance takes place, that is something completely alien to that. So, what are the kinds of examples that he gives? Castells suggests, flexible work destroys the linearity of work time, in the sense that working hours and working time are no longer conforming to the regimented linear time of the factory but also not returning to anything even loosely resembling a cycle.

Time is no longer an objective category, but managed as a resource with reference to the temporality of the other firms, networks, processes and products. So, I do not think that we would get a better context than talking about it sitting in the time of a pandemic. You know that work from home.

So why does it happen, work from home? Work from home significantly disturbed, or destabilized our distinction between the personal realm and the official realm. We have seen very hilarious, cartoons or video clips where people do a lot of mistakes, and then, very well nonsensical stuff, because they are really not able to do that, not able to reconcile the whole thing.

So, this distinction between your official time and your personal time, official time and your family time, is now completely disturbed, especially I am talking in the context of this COVID-19. But this trend is now going to be a dominant trend, or it has already become a kind of a dominant trend in many places.

In a conventional sense, imagine a typical factory, you leave your house around 8 o'clock or eight thirty in the morning, and there is an official time where you are supposed to work, then punch or sign and a siren, then you work and you work till evening. After that you are done, you come back. Now that separation between 8 hours of work or 9 hours of work is completely shattered that your personal life and your official life is completely intermingled.

So, I heard people talking about getting phone calls or getting messages, having to send emails in in the night. So, there is no distinction between what is your personal life and what is your professional life. So, he gives this as one example, where time is redefined, the categories that are used to define time is changing because your larger social organization is undergoing change.

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- From the individual's point of view, Castells continues, the breaking down of reliable rhythms can be experienced on all timescales. For an increasing number of people, work is no longer nine to five.
- Social institutions organized as flexible networks are less capable of stabilizing time than rigid hierarchies. Rigid hierarchies are too inflexible to deal with multiple temporalities; their historical rise to dominance, from the seventeenth century onward, was connected with the imposition of a dominant temporality, clock time, on everyone. Flexible networks, by their very flexibility, are not capable of doing this, and nor do they require it.




From the individual's point of view, Castells continues, the breaking down of reliable rhythms can be experienced on old timescales, for an increasing number of people work is no longer 9 to 5. So, this and especially you can also imagine the people who worked in call centres. So, the people who worked in call centres, it was a completely different experience for them, they have to stay awake throughout the night, and then they have to really struggle to sleep in the daytime.

So that was completely different from what they have been experienced. So, the time undergoes for a complete transformation in their personal life, so it is not really, do not think it has some kind of definitional change happens, it is not really definitional change, but changes happen in their personal life, their private life, their social organization, everything undergoes significant transformation.


So, he says that this because informationalism requests you to be awake and then interact with people who are on the other side of the globe. And that is possible only in the night, and your understanding of what is your sleeping time, what is your bedtime goes for a toss. So, social institutions organized as flexible networks are less capable of stabilizing time than rigid hierarchies.

Rigid hierarchies are too inflexible to deal with multiple temporalities, their historical rise to dominance from the seventeenth century onwards was connected with the imposition of a dominant temporality, clock time on everyone. Flexible networks by their very flexibility are not capable of doing this nor do they require it. So, he says that this informationalism, if you consider it as being the basic social structure, need not depend upon a linear dominant timeframe, rather you can look for a more flexible one.

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- Influence on biological, personal life: mixing up of biological and legal parents
- What were once stable, natural sequences of reproduction are now becoming mixed up. Children are born after the death of the mother, or conceived after the death of the father, and they can be orphaned before they are born, making for a rather strange succession of generations.



And most interestingly, he gives the example of increasing possibilities and increasing research, new discoveries, new technologies, that are happening in biological sciences, especially in biotechnology, the kind of fusion between science and technology and biology of human beings. So that he says, it is mixing up with quite a lot of your biological and personal and technological things, where the point that he made that a predictable sequence becomes very difficult one.

See, for example, in the conventional sense, you think that two people, a couple, they want to get married, they get married, and then they get the children. So, and these children for the children, they are the parents, they are the biological parents, they are the legal parents, everything happens in a very smooth manner. That is how every society made sense of that of course, there are different types of marriages.

But there was a sequence, there was an established understood notion, but now think about surrogacy, think about people who fly in from other countries, and then who hire women to have this, pregnancy housed in the womb, and then get the child and then then fly away.


What is happening to our notions of time? What is happening to the notions of biological and legal parents? The woman in whose body the embryo grew, or the foetus grew has nothing to do with that, she is she is only biological parent, biological mother, only till the delivery and after that, she has absolutely no legal sense. So, all these, the kinds of drastic transformations happening in in biotechnology, he gives as an example of this kind of a chaotic ordering.

What were one stable, natural consequences of reproduction are now becoming mixed up. Children are born after the death of the mother. We know that there are technologies to freeze the embryo or to store the sperm or you can even store the fertilized eggs for some time and then then make it develop later. So, a host of new technologies are coming which are

completely different from our traditional understanding of giving birth or parenthood or childhood, a whole host of other things.

So, children are born after the death of mother or conceived after the death of the father, if we are able to store the sperm of a man, we have heard stories about it, and they can be orphaned before they are born, is it not? And making for a rather strange succession of generations.

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- Through the concept of timeless time, Castells argues that informationalism, based on the "twin revolutions in microelectronics and genetic engineering," is introducing a new temporality that is characterized neither by natural rhythms, nor by a unifying abstract time ordering society along its fixed grid. Rather, the new temporality is characterized by an absence of a fixed sequence itself.
- Too far-fetched??



So, these things which were possible only in scientific fiction are becoming a reality in the day-to-day life. So, that is what, Castells argues as some of the very fundamental features of this era of informationalism.

Through the concept of timeless time, Castells argues that informationalism based on the twin revolutions in microelectronics and genetic engineering is introducing a new temporality that is characterized neither by natural rhythms nor by a unifying abstract time organizing society along its fixed rate.

Rather, the new temporality is characterized by an absence of fixed sequence itself, the same point that we discussed. But the whole question is, is it too farfetched? Is it too exaggerative? To say that we are predominantly, even imagine even the most globalized, industrialized society like Western society, are they really not able to make sense of fixed social sequence, a fixed sequence? Are they in a completely confused realm?

I personally think not so, I do not think that. A host of people have criticized Castells for making these too far-fetched claims. But these pointers are important. As I mentioned earlier, a good scholar, he or she tries not only to establish very visible facts, but also will be able to point it certain directions.

Many times, it might look exaggerative, many times it looks as too far-fetched. But maybe gradually, we might have to take those ideas, those arguments, those exaggerations, those farfetched claims will have to be taken seriously in the in the future.

So, Castells's arguments about timeless time and the whole argument that we know no longer have a dominant temporality. It might look farfetched now, but maybe, who knows, after some time, we may have to encounter those things more closely. So let us stop here and we'll meet again for the next class, again, with maybe one or two classes on Manuel Castells. Thank you.