With the growth of information technology, there has been an impact upon the way in which both society and its members work. This has, for many, heralded the beginning of a new age (Lyon, 1988). Some theorists argue that contemporary society has developed into a ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ economy, which has seen the rise in high skilled, professional, meaningful work and the decline of low skilled work due to the need for a competitive advantage in a global economy (Grint and Nixon, 2015). However, in this critical reflection I will argue that the information economy is a misnomer that distorts the position of women and presents a one sided image of the global economy.

The decline of blue-collar work in the post-industrial society has led to the rise in both knowledge industries and thus knowledge workers and the growth in the service industry (Bell, 1973). Bell sees the decline in industrial work as progress due to the fact that service based work and face to face interactions at work hold more meaning and it has further been argued that this development of the service industry has taken place within a new form of post-Fordist capitalism in which service workers are not as tightly enslaved, as the previous working class was (Kumar, 2005). However, this has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the precarious, unstable position post-Fordist workers are placed in.

For Bell, the post-industrial society has come as a result of structural change in the form of both economic and occupational shifts and the subsequent change in class structure. Industrial based work has declined, knowledge based fields such as scientific research have increased and women have entered the labour force in largely professional roles (Bell, 1999). With the occupational structure being mostly made up of those in knowledge industries, this is the identifier of a knowledge economy. Education is key to Bell’s (1973) understanding of contemporary society as it helps to form the knowledge so crucial to the knowledge economy therefore, to Bell, universities are the
“primary institution” (1973: 44) in shaping and developing the increasingly high-skilled work force his theory focuses on. Universities and other educational institutions have the means of distributing and creating theoretical knowledge. This information and theoretical knowledge is now at the ‘core’ of how we conduct our lives (Webster, 2006).

Similarly, Manuel Castells (2000) has discussed a development in societal structure and thus a change in work and the type of occupations being held in society. Whilst Castells does not hold the growth of information technologies directly responsible for the societal restructuring and shift, the network society would not be in existence without information technology (Webster, 2004). The use of information for the purpose of growth is not new, however what marks this current period of informational capitalism is the way information is used for growth and production, in a “cumulative feedback loop” (Castells, 2000: 31). This allows for knowledge to develop the technology further through the process of ‘doing’ and the information fed back in to the process creates an increase in efficiency. Castells further discusses the labour market in network society as being categorised by the flexibility of the workers based on a core-periphery model that requires employees to highly flexible and mould to the needs of the employer. Ultimately those on the periphery are subjected to a high turnover rate: they are disposable and replaceable. Despite this, Castells contends there has been a large growth of job roles that are seen as ‘informational’, such as managerial roles within the global information economy, thus despite the growth of both high and low level jobs the speed at which high skilled work is developing through the use of information technologies means the levels of inequality between high and low skill workers will diminish over time.

This is the information society rhetoric that has been presented by theorists like Bell and Castells. The emphasis on a new society categorised by knowledge is idealistic and has resulted in the positive attributes being overplayed. This ignores the rise and growth of a new servant class, the polarisation of classes and the increase of vulnerability in precarious job contracts. The growth of high skilled information work has not led to a decline in low skilled work but instead a shift towards new service work, servicing the elites.

Whilst Bell does acknowledge a development in low skilled occupations as a direct link to the growth of the knowledge industries due to increase of leisure activities as a result of the growth of high skilled work (Grint & Nixon, 2015) he provides a simplistic understanding of the occupational structure. Castells (2000) however, does have a more nuanced focus when discussing the polarisation of classes within occupational structure but his concluding understanding of what he believes to be the shrinking social and wage inequality over time, again falls short of the reality. Sassen (2002) found within the leading job divisions in New York and other large cities, between 30% and 50% of the workers were low-wage workers, rather than the highly skilled professionals theorised by Bell and Castells.
The growth of the professional industry and development of the global economy has had direct implications for low-level work as both the corporations and their employed professionals have a need for low-level workers such as cleaners and nannies. This work, often done by migrant women (Dyer et al, 2010), has been both created by and in service for the information industries. Therefore, Bell’s (1999) claim that women have entered the job market in primarily professional roles is obsolete. The optimistic focus on the women that have entered professional roles has blinded Bell to the reality of occupational structure. It further ignores the working relationships that this in itself produces: white, professional, dual-income and high earning households hiring immigrant maids. Or the use of more personal services such as spas at hotels, where businessmen stay or sex work are all connected in that they provide a service for the elite class and arguably replace roles previously held within the family.

Ultimately, the entrance of some women into the labour market has resulted in the commodification of previous domestic roles held by women in the home. These roles are now filled by women migrating from third world countries through methods made available during the process of globalisation and a globalised labour market (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). The reintroduction of a new ‘serving class’ further extends to services seen as ‘crucial’ to the affluent lifestyles held by high level workers, this can be seen in the growth of boutique hotels and expensive restaurants (Sassen, 2002) increasing inequality and polarising classes. The work done by the new servant class is heavily gendered through the naturalising of the skills necessary for employment as ‘feminine’, for example, through emotional work and people skills necessary for providing the service of a nanny. The intersection of race in this equation through the process of migration is important when considering the gendering of service work (Dyer et al, 2010) as often migrant women are moving for what is seen as ‘women’s work’ (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). However, it is important to note that differences in experiences of ethnic minorities are clear and should be recognised, as minority groups cannot be classed as one homogenous collective: it is instead intersecting social factors that impact realms of opportunities and a class, race and gender framework that can be applied in order to understand the occupations and positions of women within a post-industrial society. These differences are evidenced in the fact that Chinese women are more likely to be working in skilled trades, black women in care roles and Asian women in customer service (Grint & Nixon, 2015). Yet despite the differences within fields of work and positions within the occupational structure, the global labour market is developing within the pre-existing structures of racism and misogyny (Eisenstein, 2011).

Moreover, due to the demands of flexibility, there has been a growth of more precarious work arrangements for peripheral workers, such as zero hour or temporary contracts. This has been seen as a direct result of a globalised economy (Grint and Nixon, 2015). These sectors and job roles, which require this level of flexibility and employment areas in which
women dominate (Hochschild, 1983), thus placing them in a vulnerable position (Walby, 2011). For some theorists this position of women in unstable and precarious work is due to their rejection of the role of the breadwinner (Hakim, 2005). However, it is clear that for many immigrant women this low-level work does position them as the primary earner within their family, sending remittances home in order to support them (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). Due to the methods often used to supply these women with work, either undocumented entry or through trafficking, this continues to put these women in vulnerable positions rife with exploitation despite their ‘breadwinner’ status. These women are often stuck with no support due to their illegal status in the country they inhabit (Sassen, 2002).

Furthermore the notion of a revolutionary information society fetishizes the experiences of the few rather than recognising the experiences of all within contemporary society. This blind optimism further silences the voices of the low-wage workers within ‘knowledge’ sectors. The subjective concept of ‘knowledge’ in itself perpetuates and entrenches inequalities (Walby, 2011) as structural barriers continue to exist and categorise occupational positions. To conclude, the work done by the migrant women in serving the higher classes makes the very concept of a global information society possible: it underpins and is crucial to the very infrastructure it serves. It is the backbone of the global information economy.
**Bibliography**


Images:

