

Post-Industrialism: Theory versus Practice

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Transformations in contemporary society have been identified and defined by a number of different sociological approaches such as post-industrial, post-modern, information and knowledge, societies. According to some, like Marsh (2011), these approaches tend to describe the same changes in similar ways but Information Society and Castells' (2000) network society theories have made significant contributions to our understanding of contemporary society. Various post-industrial theories suggest societies have changed so significantly they require a new label depending on specific characteristics. For example, information society discourses would suggest that the defining characteristic driving this change is information and knowledge.

However, to constitute a new kind of society the characteristics defining it should arguably meet two criteria: they must establish societies as significantly different from previous societies, there should also be evidence that these features operate in and have changed society as a whole as opposed to isolated areas. Building on existing literature, I will critique the idea of an information society by discussing the extent



to which this approach can be applied in traditionally industrial regions such as the North East of England.

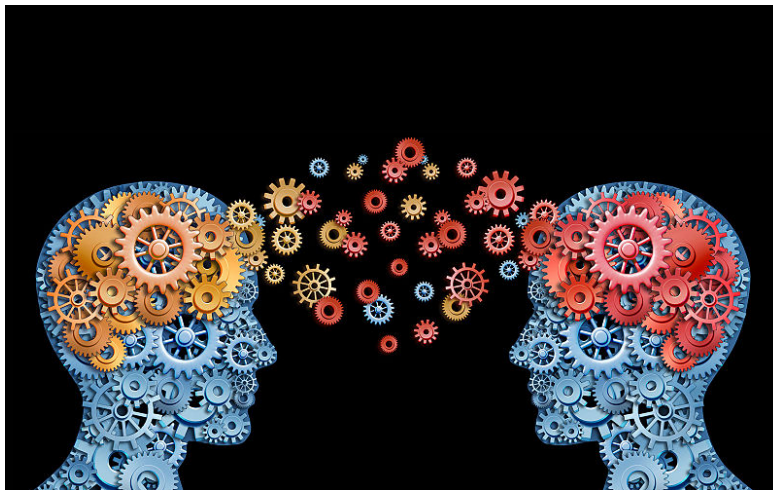
Post-industrial approaches have attempted to describe changes in the Capitalist structure, stemming from the emergence of neo-liberal globalisation and revolutionary changes in the organisation of production such as those brought about by Taylorism and Fordism. These changes are largely framed in the context of information or Informational Capitalism. These changes have had significant effects on social structures, but post-industrialist theories tend to look at this in a more positive light and are keen to focus on characteristics that are more obvious in society such as networks, ICTs and knowledge labour.

As Fuchs (2009) argues, they fail to explore some negative consequences, for example, structural inequality within society and exploitative power relations that continue to exist. This essay will look at this and similar criticisms in more depth, evaluating information society theories through its application to traditionally industrial and manufacturing areas in the UK that may not

have benefitted from informationalism or the knowledge economy that Castells (2000), in many ways, idealises, and have arguably been left behind.

The idea of knowledge and information being central to the economies and division of labour in postmodern societies is stressed in the works of Lyotard, Sehr's knowledge society, and Toffler's Third Wave economy (Fuchs, 2009). Castells (2000) argues these ideas fail to adequately describe contemporary societies and, drawing on their research, develops his theory of a network society. He argues that global networks based on communication technologies are now the primary driving force in shaping advanced capitalist societies; they define the nature of 'production, experience, power, and culture' (Castells, 2000: 500).

Castells defines the network society as 'a social structure made of information networks powered by information technologies characteristic of the informationalist paradigm' (Castells, 2001: 166), thus placing the theory at the core of post-industrial discourses on informationalism. He emphasises the role of information and knowledge, specifically through ICTs, as the basis of production systems and one of the defining components of the network society. Key developments in ICTs as well as the crisis of industrialism in Western Capitalism and the Soviet Union's statism and the emergence of social movements in the late 1960s are fundamental to the theory. According to Castells (2000), they have triggered a transformation in contemporary society's social and economic structures so radically



different from pre-industrial and industrial eras, they constitute a new kind of society.

As with most post-industrial, postmodernity, or late modernity theorists who suggest we have entered a new kind of society on the basis of a particular characteristics, Castells (2000) fails somewhat to explore in depth and define what exactly about the nature of networks has changed to constitute a new society. As Webster (2006) writes on the information society, these discourses often make the assumption that these characteristics play such an obvious role in contemporary society that there is no need to clarify or go beyond vague definitions of their concepts.

Similarly, a key criticism of Castells' (2000) work is that he relies on the analysis of networks in practice as opposed to contextualising his approach in the relevant theoretical debates, and fails to define the particularities of these concepts (Stalder, 2006). Further, Golding (2000: 170) suggests that information society discourses idealise 'the privatization of information, and the

incorporation of ICT developments into the expansion of the free market' and the notion of a new kind of society, so much so that it risks ignoring the darker side of what they are describing.

Fundamental to any society based on global networks of the production and consumption of knowledge is a more compatible relationship between capital and labour; it has been argued that, because of this, class conflicts have become increasingly obsolete (Bang, 2008 in Marsh, 2011). This is arguably an idealisation of contemporary society. Network society discourses also suggest that the complexity of issues in contemporary

society has caused a shift in traditional political hierarchies (Marsh, 2011).

As sociological disciplines explored networks, the political sciences have been increasingly concerned with the changing nature of politics and government. Some suggest that 'governance has replaced government' (ibid.: 74), that is, in contemporary society governments rely on 'experts' and networks through which information is exchanged. If information has become the defining aspect of power and, as some discuss, social hierarchies have transformed on the basis of who holds this information



(see Gouldner's notion of new class, 1978 and Webster, 2006) then perhaps changes in information and knowledge do indeed constitute a new society. However, in his work on bureaucratisation and networks of relationships through which bureaucracy is established (a key feature of rationalisation and modernity), Weber (in Sagar and Rosser, 2009) discusses administrative power through both expert and concealed knowledge or information. In this sense, information appears to be a defining characteristic of the industrial era too.

Transformations in class structures and power relations that post industrialist theories address does not necessarily equate to their elimination or even decline. These theories are often quick to point out phenomena such as weakening class boundaries or political class dealignment, despite high levels of spatially concentrated inequality both globally and within developed countries. They seem less inclined to explore this new class Gouldner (1978) and others discuss, or social hierarchies based on information in more

depth. To what extent are these hierarchies based on traditional class structures? Information sector work is usually high or semi-skilled, these opportunities are arguably limited to those who, Bourdieu's terms, hold the 'right' kind of economic, social and cultural capital (2000).

Additionally, high-skilled work is often exclusive to those with higher qualifications –

research into inequality and education has consistently found that inequality is reproduced and maintained through the educational system and performance in this system

is largely determined by position in the class structure (NatCen for Social Research, 2008). Further, information occupations are still largely concentrated in specific areas - in the UK for example, London has a much larger information and knowledge economy workforce than the North East (ONS, 2015).

Information society discourses suggest there have been significant increases in the information economy and a paralleled decline in manufacturing jobs (see Machlup, 1962). High rates of unemployment in the North East – currently at 5.9%, unemployment rates in the North East are consistently the lowest in the UK (ONS, 2017) – suggesting perhaps that the decline in the manufacturing sector has not been balanced with growth in the information sector in this region. The decline in manufacturing jobs in this area suggests merely the end of industrialism not the emergence of a new kind of society.

A key criticism of Castells' (2000) work is his reluctance to place it in theoretical debates. He also takes for granted a widespread acceptance not only that these concepts are

significant in contemporary society, but that they exist at all. Building on, and in some cases rejecting, Marxist theories of production and consumption systems, it does, however, raise important points about the interconnectedness of globalised knowledge economies. However, the key features of informational societies mentioned are less applicable to areas that have been left behind by globalisation. In the North of England, the decline of manufacturing sectors, such as mining in the 1980s and, more recently, the steel and chemical industries have been closely linked with the rise of neoliberal globalisation as these regional industries are undercut by lower prices offered by global companies.

In the case of Tata Steel, a major employer in Teesside, the collapse is acknowledged to be the result of the Chinese steel industry over producing steel and pushing down the market price, with many affected suggesting that the UK and EU governments should have stepped in by introducing tariffs for foreign steel or supporting national industries (Elliott, 2016). The collapse of these industries have had devastating consequences for the communities that, without the influx of information sector jobs seen elsewhere, still rely on them. Post industrialist approaches, particularly information and network society theories, often ignore these aspects of contemporary society.

These theories themselves produce information and play their own specific role in the information and knowledge economy and should therefore be more aware of their own bias and influence. The explanation of contemporary society provided by post industrialist theories is based on the opinion of those in thriving information sectors. As discussed, some have suggested that the political spheres in information societies rely on 'experts', and advocates of the information society should perhaps be more aware of this when glossing over the darker side of post industrialism.

The consequences of inequality on key aspects such as life expectancy, health, and economics remain prominent issues in contemporary society and, as set out above, are becoming increasingly salient as the nature of production and consumption changes. Perhaps a more holistic description of society would allow us to recognise and therefore address the issues we currently face, suggesting we all live in an information society ignores the reality that some areas that are still struggling with the transition from industrialism to post industrialism.

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