

MANUEL CASTELLS: THE CITIZEN VERSUS THE MACHINE

As the technological revolution revolutionizes economic life and communications and shakes industrial society to its foundations, a noted Spanish sociologist asks where the citizen stands in the emerging 'information society'

The most recent meeting of the G8 group (the world's eight leading industrial powers) decided for the first time that globalization needed to be "humanized". Does that mean it's inhuman right now?

It's very human and very creative in the eyes of the strong and very inhuman for the weak. It creates unprecedented polarization.

A third of the world's population has substantially raised its standard of living and expanded its cultural and technological resources. The other side of the coin is that the latest UNDP *Human Development Report* showed a massive growth in both inequality and poverty as well as social exclusion and marginalization all over the world, with a few big exceptions including India, China and Chile.

Forty per cent of the planet's population lives in misery on less than two dollars a day. Within this category, a growing number live in extreme poverty, especially cultural poverty. No one in this plight can make any use of the emerging information society. So "humanizing" globalization means harnessing all the enormous creative might of the new technologies, of new economic productivities and of worldwide communication through the Internet so that it benefits people outside the most advanced, educated and sophisticated sectors of the most powerful countries. But for the moment, this is just a pipe dream. We're told we have to do things differently, but the effects of such discrimination are still not being corrected. In fact quite the opposite is happening.

Does this discrimination match the divide between so-called "generic labour" and "self-programmable labour"?

Not entirely. Self-programmable labour has enough information, education and culture to adapt to constantly changing technological and professional conditions. But in a system which has become purely based on the individual, without any social safety net or solidarity, belonging to this category doesn't mean you're invulnerable: if a major incident

The people who work in Silicon Valley are paid to a large extent in shares rather than a regular salary. So it's in their interest to push their way upward in the firm, even if it means kicking a colleague out of a job on the grounds that he or she isn't productive enough.

occurs, such as a physical or psychological illness or a family crisis, you find yourself on the other side of the fence. Many middle-class children, for example, start taking drugs between the age of 18 and 20 and end up in prison, thus heading right down the path to social exclusion.

Generic labour refers to workers who, because they don't have a specific qualification and an adequate level of education and culture, cannot fit into the predominant system of production: machines can or could replace them. Within this category, there are two groups. There are those who are still relatively protected, who keep their jobs because they work in institutions or live in countries that help and protect them, and guarantee a decent standard of living. There are also those who live either in run-down city suburbs

in rich countries or in poverty-stricken regions and nations without the infrastructure or companies that make possible and guarantee a transition towards the information society. Such people are totally excluded. That social exclusion comes from lack of work.

Why do you say capitalism is much more brutal today than it was in the past?

Because it's broken the social contract. These days, networks mean you can connect everything that carries value for this dominant system, thus making those connected to it extremely dynamic. But this structure also means that anything for which it has little regard—individuals, regions, sectors and companies—don't get connected and are thereby condemned. And since it manages to take control of anything which could be of value to it, capitalism can afford to be extremely choosy and to impose its own rules. This is helped by the fact that states and institutions, political or para-political, which acted as a counterweight during the Industrial Revolution, have very little influence over worldwide communications, capital movements, technological development and production. Might is right, a purely Darwinian logic.

Is anyone exempt from this logic?

In a way, it takes root independently of a company's will and those who resist are crushed by competition because the networks consist only of the strong. And it takes root inside the firms themselves, independent of managers or outside shareholders. Look at advanced capitalism in Silicon Valley which, incidentally, embodies in a sense the 1960s Marxist ideal of workers' management. The people who work in Silicon Valley are paid to a large

CASTELLS ON THE UNITED NATIONS

I think international organizations like UNESCO have a really important part to play. They can be a link between governments which are still, after all, political instruments, and demands based on people's ideals, especially in the fields of development and peace.

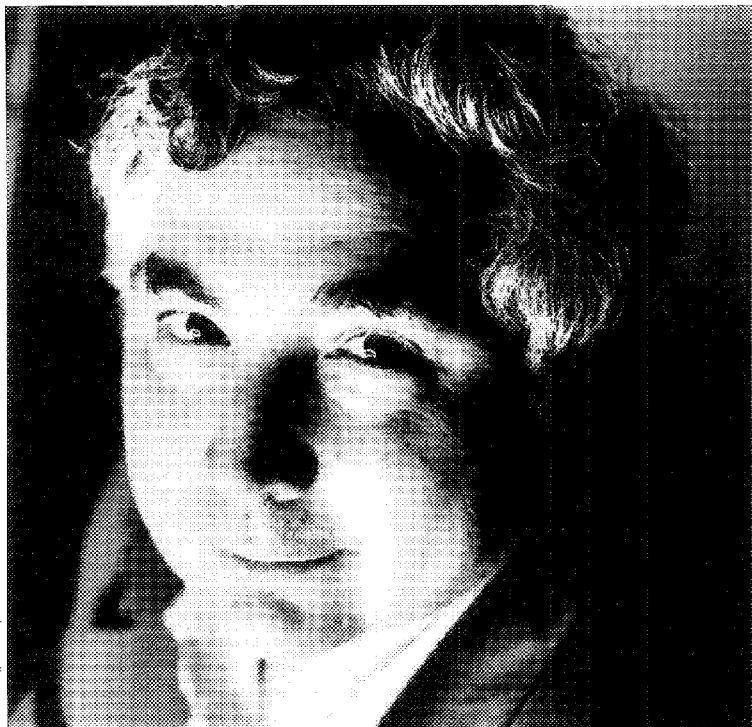
So they must be meeting-places but, increasingly, also forums which give rise to practical projects. For example, everyone agrees education is the key to reducing inequality and exclusion. But what exactly does education mean? What must be done on a world scale so the kind of education needed reaches the two-thirds of humanity who currently have no access to it? The response must indeed come from governments. But UNESCO is the very kind of organization within which a world education strategy can be drawn up.

Bodies like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or the G8 group of countries are managing systems of worldwide exchanges but they concentrate on technological innovation, economic productivity and growth of information. Their power must be balanced by international organizations like UNESCO, the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organisation, which could draw up a new world social and cultural contract, as the other bodies did for economics and technology. But they will only succeed in this if they acquire similar legitimacy and authority by using the might of the networks.

they can contribute to their own or any other firm. The unskilled don't have such power or any real power of collective bargaining through trade unions. In the now-dominant private sector, unions these days have only a meagre role and union membership is steadily falling. This is why we must resist shrinking the social security safety-net and support a transition from protecting individuals who work (the situation in most countries) to protecting people whether they work or not.

You paint a very gloomy picture. . . .

Saying that these changes only lead to social exclusion isn't the whole story. They are extremely useful for very many people—the worldwide image- and opinion-makers. This is not a small elite or oligarchy, since between 30 and 40 per cent of the population in countries like the United States and France belong to it. ▶



© J. J. Levy / Corbis / Everett / Retna

extent in shares rather than a regular salary. So it's in their interest to push their way up in the firm, even if it means kicking a colleague out of a job on the grounds that he or she isn't productive enough.

Does this illustrate a trend which you emphasize, namely the extraordinary individualization of people's destinies?

Setting aside current myths about the impact of the new techno-economic system on jobs, usually measured in terms of falling unemployment, the fundamental change lies in the greater flexibility of labour relations. The way companies operate in networks—both internal and external—is destroying the notion of a stable, reliable job which dates from the Industrial Revolution.

In Britain, the birthplace of that revolution, 55 per cent of the workforce is involved in various kinds of temporary, part-time or freelance work. The traditional model of organized labour is no longer the rule. The same thing is happening in cities in poor countries, which are becoming more and more urbanized. There the so-called informal economy holds sway and labour relations revolve round the long-term lack of stable and regular work. Economic activity in such countries can be quite primitive but some of it is very advanced.

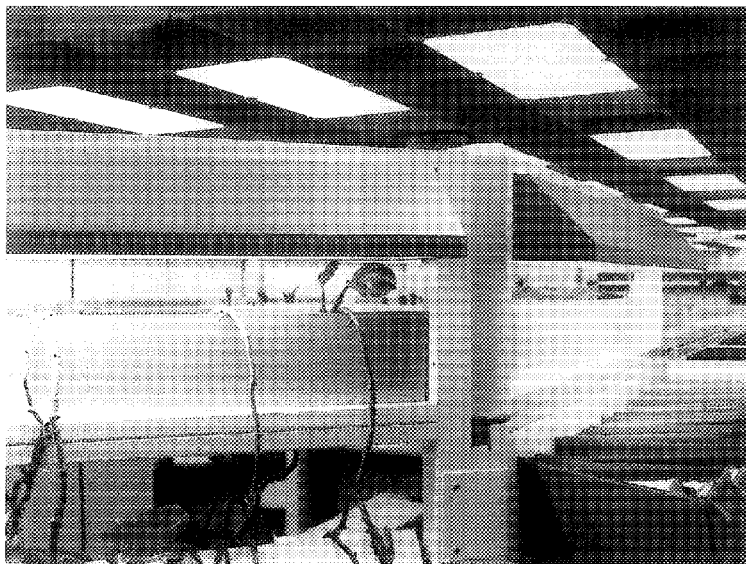
Whether we like it or not, job flexibility is so much more efficient than previous arrangements that firms which still operate with a mainly salaried workforce and stable and established working methods are doomed to failure by the laws of competition. Firms are also relying more and more

The way companies operate in networks—both internal and external—is destroying the notion of a stable, reliable job which dates from the Industrial Revolution

on a core of skilled workers they want to keep (and to whom they give stable jobs) and on a huge mass of temporary and sub-contracted workers. What we have is an individualization of the relationship between salaried workers and firms on one side and among self-employed workers on the other. Everybody sub-contracts with everybody else.

But this trend introduces a totally unequal balance of power between workers and companies. . . .

Yes, but also between workers themselves. The strongest have real bargaining power in the market, depending on what



© Lars Tunbjörk/Agence 111 Paris

This photo and photo on facing page feature in a report by Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk on the dehumanization of the office environment.

▶ They've gained huge opportunities not only for economic but also social, intellectual and cultural creativity. As well as generating social exclusion, the technological revolution has creative and liberating aspects that we should not ignore.

Such as?

The Internet has reduced the power of governments and the big media monopolies to control people. One result is more openness, especially where political corruption is concerned. The powerful are used to spying on ordinary citizens, but now citizens can spy on the powerful. Work can be more independent and professional advancement more varied. We don't have to stay stuck for life in the same bureaucracy and only advance through seniority. The educational level of women is rising to an extraordinary extent (most university graduates in the U.S. are now women, for example). Their professional advance is continuing. Discrimination is still there, but it's dwindling. It's better than being shut away at home.

One of the main points of your work is that the information society seems to harbour the seeds of opposition to itself. How is that?

The process is very complex. The modern state—whether liberal, socialist or Marxist—has been built on a denial of basic and historical identities. The state made the nation, not the other way round. But it also managed to fuse these

original identities into a new abstract identity which it called citizenship. And it protected its citizens. But globalization means the state can no longer guarantee such protection or provide the meaning necessary to foster citizenship.

Two reactions are possible to the

A MONUMENTAL WORK

The publication of Manuel Castells' monumental trilogy about information technology and the global economy, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*,¹ attracted wide attention and superlatives from reviewers impressed by the erudition and breadth of this "encyclopaedic work".

Castells' aims might indeed seem grandiose. He says he wants to "understand our world"—all of it—to try to "give meaning to what appears to us today as terrible chaos." In the last quarter of a century, he says, "a technological revolution—information technology—has transformed our ways of thinking, consuming, buying and selling, running businesses, communicating, living, dying, making war and making love."

He explains why and how these processes have come about in three volumes of over 300 pages each, the result of 12 years' interdisciplinary research which took him all over the world. He says the structure of industrial society—its economies, political units, industrial complexes and cultural identities—always revolved round central points but that these are now disappearing. In what he calls the "informational society," a system of networks develops in every sector. "The power of flows overwhelms the flows of power," he says.

building of an information society which gives pride of place to competition. For the strongest, those with money and power, competition can give purpose to their lives if they develop a totally individualistic, even narcissistic and consumerist identity, becoming big earners and big spenders. All networked societies are basically individualistic. It's the liberal and libertarian ideology of the dominant technical and economic elite.

But all around them, a whole mass of people either lack the resources to connect to this individualism or else reject it. They give meaning to their lives by building community identities. They build them on cultural practices which express simple, sturdy values, such as God, country, ethnic identity, land and family. This makes them feel protected in some way against the worldwide changes over which they have lost all control.

But these identities are ambivalent. . . .

They can be open because they're engaged in dialogue with people who have other identities. But they can be dogmatic when expressed in a rigid, inward-looking way which shuts out all other identities. That's the crux of the problem: everybody can't be Argentine or Serb, Catholic or Muslim, female or homosex-

Such iconoclasm is the product of an unusual intellectual journey. In 1962, the 20-year-old Castells, "a shade Marxist but not Leninist" and to a far greater extent "anarchist and libertarian", left his native Spain to study in France. He was expelled from France in May 1968 but returned two years later.

By chance, he gravitated towards urban sociology and became one of its leading exponents. His *La Question urbaine* (1972) was translated into 10 languages, and *The City and the Grassroots* won the C. Wright Mills Prize in 1983 for the best social science book published in the United States. Today he is professor of sociology and city and regional planning at the Center for Western European Studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

A friendly and persuasive man, with an impish sense of irony, Castells refuses to act the guru and points out that his work has limits. "Every time an intellectual has tried to answer the question 'what should we do?' it's led to disaster," he says. ■

1. The 3 volumes, published by Blackwell, Oxford, UK, are: *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), *The Power of Identity* (1997) and *End of Millennium* (1998).

ual, so the strong affirmation of a unique identity as the only way to give meaning to one's life leads to fragmentation into tribes, to a sort of collective atomization.

The only answer to this major threat is to build bridges between these very different identities. The main challenge for the state is to establish not only a political contract between citizens but a cultural contract so that all these cultural codes and multiple identities can communicate with each other. Only with such a contract can a state guarantee the coexistence of these identities while recognizing their individual expression. But in view of the state's historical mode of construction, it is ill equipped to do this.

In view of this dual threat of exclusion and fragmentation, how can a shared awareness develop and lead to global political action?

This is the key question and I don't have an answer. I've based my work on observation, which isn't forecasting. What I see is a lot of resistance to the grip of the network system. Some of these networks no longer obey any human logic whatso-

All networked societies are basically individualistic. It's the liberal and libertarian ideology of the dominant technical and economic elite.

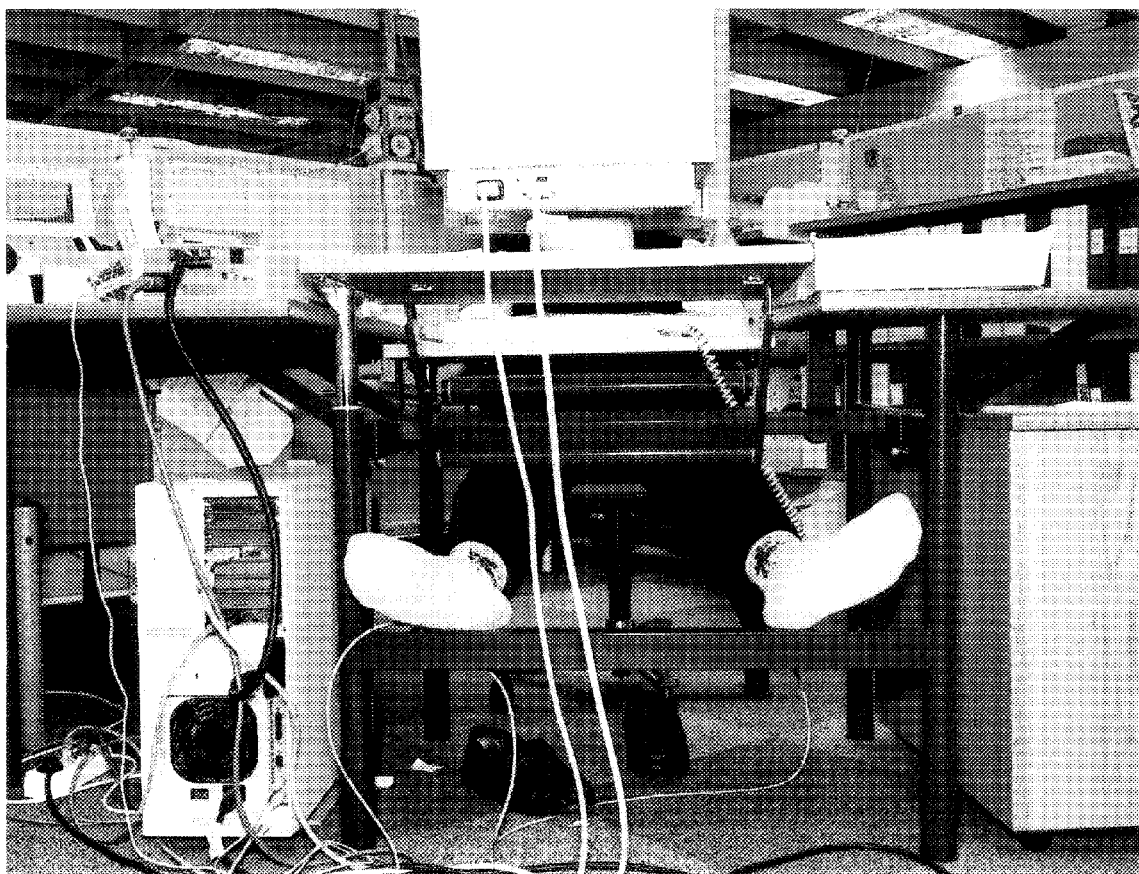
ever: they have become what I would describe as automata.

The best example is the world financial market. It controls everything and no one controls it, not even governments. First, it pools together money from all kinds of origins, not just financiers' money but everyone's, including our own (in the form of savings or pension funds). Computer programmes and electrical circuits then keep it constantly moving around. Finally, and above all, it obeys rules which are only partly economic, because what I call information turbulence plays a crucial part. Various players, including political players, send messages and create images which lead a multitude of other players to react in the financial market. But they don't act in concert and

no one can say for sure how the market will react. Many players, some more powerful than others, can thus influence the world in which these financial transactions take place. They can follow strategies, but nobody can control the process or the outcome of the game. An automaton has been created.

So what happens to politics?

Today politics are not defined by the media but within media space, which is occupied by the countless and ever more varied television stations and, increasingly, the Internet. So what comes into political existence—in other words what forms into a political opinion in people's minds—depends solely on what appears in the media. Traditional political stakeholders are adapting to this new media context. But they don't play leading roles in it at all. They've been joined by a mass of lobbies, interest groups and professional organizations which specialize in creating and manipulating messages and images. These groups create new information turbulence, which stems from their ▶



© Jan Bensch/Agence N. Paris

► determined strategies and how independent the media are. But the final political result—the impact on decisions citizens take—has no relation to the wishes of each of the players. It's the "automatic" result of interactions that nobody can control.

How do people react to this "automatism"?

I've noticed they do two things. First, they vote to express their opposition. The main changes brought about by elections—caused by shifts of mood among only 5-10 per cent of voters—are the result of opposition to a past event or decision, not of support for a future policy. Such protest votes show that citizens feel on the defensive towards the political system. Secondly, they rate the system's players right at the bottom of the league table of what they respect in society. They think they're corrupt, expensive and inefficient. As a result, more and more people are ceasing to see politics as a way of changing their lives.

What about those who do want to change things?

Our generation has been convinced

that the state is the main instrument for applying a political programme which meets the expectations and needs of civil society. But what can the state do today faced with the financial machine and the media machine? It has extremely limited room for manoeuvre. People who want to change things or do more in life than just earn money are developing a new way of conducting politics, this time without any mediation from the state. They have come to act politically by taking pragmatic ethical action, working to bring about real change in a small geographical area, at a specific time or in a limited field. Of course such an approach only brings about very small changes in comparison with all the changes that are necessary, but at least it's effective. It's a practical policy designed to bring immediate results. Successful examples of this approach include NGOs like Doctors of the World and the Jubilee 2000 movement, which has achieved substantial results in its campaign to alleviate the debt burden on the poorest countries.

Can such a piecemeal policy make a dent in this big issue?

My bet is that all these piecemeal and isolated activities, which involve hundreds of thousands of people, will gradually come together to form networks. I hope the growth of networks will eventually include those which want to fight the harmful effects of other networks. That alongside the networks of money, technology and information, alternative but just as powerful (and so just as efficient) networks will develop and convey alternative values that will steadily build new global political strategies.

But some fundamental trends are emerging even before we reach this final stage. Look at the women's movement. It managed to set off the biggest cultural revolution in human history without using traditional political means. However, the changes in cultural practices and codes, first inside women's minds, were so far-reaching that they've now been incorporated into political systems, at least where those systems are dynamic and democratic. ■

Interview by René Lefort
Director of the *UNESCO Courier*

I WISH TO SUBSCRIBE TO the UNESCO Courier

Language: English French Spanish

Rates (postage included):

Industrialized countries:

- 1 year: 251 French francs (€32,15) instead of 264FF* (11 issues including 1 double issue)
 2 years: 396 French francs (€60,35) instead of 528FF* (22 issues including 2 double issues)
 Binder: 72 French francs (€11) (for 11 issues including 1 double issue)

Developing countries or students

(Please send copy of your card):

- 1 year: 132 French francs (€20,10)
 2 years: 211 French francs (€32,15)

I enclose payment: (in French francs only) by

Bank cheque (except Eurocheque) Visa Mastercard Eurocard

N°

Expiry date:

Date and signature:

Name First name

Address

Postal code City

Optional

Age: Occupation: Teachers and students

Special field: Level:

In order to improve our service to readers, we should appreciate the help you could give us by answering the optional questions above.

(*) Total cover price

Please send this form with your remittance, in French francs only, made payable to:
the UNESCO Courier Subscription Services, 31, rue François Bonvin 75732 Paris CEDEX 15 (France)

For payments in other currencies, please contact one of the subscription agents whose addresses are opposite this order form.