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MAKING SENSE OF THE INFORMATION AGE
Sociology and Cultural Studies

This article traces the development in Britain of research on information and communications in relation to trends in Sociology and this discipline’s relations with Cultural Studies. It observes at the outset the seminal contribution of Daniel Bell’s conception of Post-Industrial Society, characterizing it as blending theory with empirical observation while providing an account of the most consequential features of change. Sociology in the UK during the 1980s largely ignored macro-level analysis and focused on work and employment, took its starting point as opposition to the technological determinism associated with this first wave enthusiasm for the ‘microelectronics revolution’, and produced localized and textured studies. Manuel Castells’ conception of the Network Society, while distinctive, signalled a return to the scale and scope offered by Bell, notably in being a macro analysis that combined theory and empirical evidence. Castells’ contribution coincided with a second wave of technological enthusiasm associated especially with the Internet. Alongside this Sociology in Britain has experienced the rise of Cultural Studies, a field that has competed for important parts of what might have been considered Sociology’s terrain. Indeed, Cultural Studies has outpaced Sociology in response to recent changes in the information domain. Its emergence expressed little concern with technological determinism, embracing ‘virtuality’ and being more open to the exploration of expanding culture. Nonetheless, Cultural Studies remains methodologically flawed while, like so much sociological research on ICTs and information, seemingly incapable of combining theory and empirical evidence that identify and explain the major contours of change.

Keywords Information Age; Information Society; Sociology; Cultural Studies
Introduction

I have been thinking and writing about information trends and information and communications technologies (ICTs) for over 25 years. I have done so as a Sociologist, located chiefly in universities in the United Kingdom, with almost a decade as an academic visitor in a Scandinavian university plus regular periods spent in the United States. During this quarter century the discipline has developed in many ways, for instance coming to terms with Feminism, embracing and then spurning multiple shades of Marxism, and warming and cooling with regard to the relative importance of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. Along the way, postmodernism – as both substantive development and epistemological assault – has been encountered. Of the challenges for Sociology over these years few have been more consequential than having to come to terms with the emergence of Cultural Studies (and its close cousin Media Studies). Indeed, if bookshops are any guide, one may even suggest there has been a takeover of much Sociology by Cultural Studies, or at least the occupancy by Cultural Studies of territory towards which one might have supposed Sociology had a prior claim. If one is suspicious of bookstore stocks as indicative of the health of a discipline, then witness the explosive growth of university courses in communications, media and Cultural Studies itself while Sociology numbers have grown at a much slower rate. In this article I should like to reflect on approaches to, and issues concerning, information and ICTs particularly in light of the sometimes troubled relations between Sociology and Cultural Studies during this period. I shall argue that there has been a shift, amongst students of change, away from interest in the Information Society (a term coined by Sociology) towards concern with the character of Cyberspace and Virtuality that reflects the emergence of Cultural Studies and its impatience with Sociology’s inability to keep pace with the dynamism of change. I shall continue to argue, however, that sociological research on ICTs and information consistently proved incapable of developing work with the ambition and scope to match that offered by the leading thinkers Daniel Bell and Manuel Castells. Cultural Studies, while it has kept pace with change and responded more imaginatively than Sociology in its analyses, is methodologically weak and, like much Sociology, has been unable to match the vision and combination of empirical and theoretical work of analysts such as Daniel Bell and Manuel Castells.

The Information Society

The notion of the Information Society has wide currency within Sociology and, indeed, far beyond the discipline’s borders. For most of my career the
concept, Information Society (and its earlier synonym Post-Industrial Society), has been a major reference point for thinking about the information domain and associated technological innovation. It is far and away the most thorough and systematic attempt to delineate the new society, how it came about and where it is likely to take us. Necessarily, then, it is something with which analysts must come to terms. This has been the case even when scholars have been disposed to reject the term (Webster 2002).

The concept of the Information Society was conceived by Daniel Bell (born May 1919), arguably the most influential sociologist of the late twentieth century. Bell is an American, and critics have been quick to observe that his model of the Information Society is US-centric (Ross 1974; Steinfels 1979). This is so, though in return one might note that Bell’s work has distinctively European reference points — evident in the literary style, the scope of his imagining, as well as his deep knowledge of and recourse to European thinkers (from as far apart — and as close — as Max Weber and Georg Lukacs [cf. Bell 1981, 1991]). That Bell is a first-generation American, born in the Lower East Side of New York City to Polish immigrants Benjamin and Anna Bolotsky who were fleeing anti-Semitism and poverty, is not consequent to his mode and substance of thinking.

Bell originated the concept as early as the 1960s, but it was launched definitively with the publication of his book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* in 1973. This seems to me to be a remarkable text and not only because of the extraordinary intellectual influence it has had. It is noteworthy also because it stood apart from the then penchant in Sociology for what one might term *high theory*. By this I mean the enthusiasm in Sociology, during the late 1960s and 1970s, for theory that merged with (perhaps more accurately aped) Philosophy, stuck to an intensely abstract level of analysis, and determinedly resisted coming to terms with empirical matters. The hold of Talcott Parsons’s Structural Functionalism was weakening by this time, but the heavyweight alternative in Sociology came in the shape of the equally reified theorizations of Althusserian Marxism, while for the less ideologically enthusiastic, aspects of Wittgenstein — leavened by Peter Winch and conjoined with Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and some phenomenology — had considerable appeal. Across Sociology there was a widespread contempt for mere ‘empiricism’, something dismissed as a naive and outdated ‘positivism’.

Against this, Bell’s project stood apart in that, while theoretically adept and ambitious, it insisted that theory should be developed in close accord with evidence. This was not a call for abandonment of theory, defined as a search for abstract and codified generalization. Indeed, it held to the ambition to produce what later came to be called, disparagingly, ‘grand narratives’ — i.e. attempts to identify the most consequential features of social life and to trace their trajectory. But it was an insistence that
generalizations should be informed by evidence rather than philosophical speculation (Mouzelis 1995) and it had a good deal in common with Robert Merton’s (1968) advocacy of ‘theories of the middle range’. This approach to theory, one that stressed the indivisible connections of theory and real-world observation, was unfashionable when Bell developed his notion of Post-Industrial Society, but he was not alone. The approach was one pursued by sociologists as diverse as Ralph Dahrendorf, Alain Touraine, A.H. Halsey, C. Wright Mills, and Ralph Miliband. It is, in my view, an admirable tradition, one aiming to produce generalized statements of significance regarding the character of societies while committed to ensuring that theories are substantively grounded and subject to reconceptualization in light of empirical evidence.

The main elements of Post-Industrial Society have been well rehearsed: Daniel Bell presented it in terms of what has been called a ‘march through the employment sectors’ (Kumar 1995, p. 26). That is, he argued that over time one could see a transfer from a time when most people gained their livelihoods in agriculture (Pre-Industrial Society), later moving into manufacturing (Industrial Society), and most recently transferring into service employment (Post-Industrial Society). The vast majority of people in advanced societies such as North America, Japan and Europe are employed in service jobs such as teaching, counselling, finance and management, something which, prima facie, endorses Bell’s account of change. The emergence of a ‘service economy’ means also that we have entered an Information Society since the major feature of service work is information. In the past work was a matter of engaging with the elements and/or working with machinery of one sort or another, but today it is a matter of relating to other people in terms of information. As Bell (1973) says, ‘what counts (now) is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information’ (p. 127). For this reason, says Bell, a Post-Industrial Society is also an Information Society.

On the matter of causation Bell is clear: the driving force of change is increased productivity, or what he terms, consciously echoing Max Weber and Henri St Simon, ‘more for less’. So long as subsistence agriculture is the norm, then everyone must work the land to eke a bare living. However, once a society manages to feed itself without everyone being so engaged (this process began with the Agricultural Revolution in the eighteenth century), then surplus labour can be transferred to industrial occupations while being assured of having sufficient to eat. Through time, continuous increases in agricultural productivity have meant there are now tiny proportions of workers employed in farming, yet we have benefited from enormously increased output from the land, so much so that nowadays almost all people in the North have access to plentiful, varied and cheap food. Such productivity increases mean today that we have more food than ever, yet only 2–3 per cent of the workforce in the UK and USA are involved with
farming. Much the same process of increased productivity and transfer out of excess workers goes on in industry, starting from the early days of industrialism when there was intensive labour in workshops, to the modern highly automated assembly line. Bell argues that the huge productivity increases in industry resulted in surplus wealth being generated, a consequence of which was the creation of ideas to spend this. These found expression in calls for services (leisure activities, smaller classrooms, extension of education, medical facilities, ...) that create jobs for people no longer required by industry (though productivity from that quarter continues to increase). The wonderful thing is that, so long as productivity keeps on growing, thereby generating additional wealth even while requiring fewer workers in farming or industry, service jobs will always be created to use this wealth since service needs are insatiable and service occupations are especially difficult to automate (for instance, witness the expansion of counsellors, therapists and ‘personal trainers’ over the last decade or so). Indeed, attests Bell (and this several years before the ecological movement took hold of imaginations) a Post-Industrial Society may become so wealthy as to turn its back on an inflexible principle of ‘more for less’, for instance refusing a new factory location in favour of environmental protection.

There can be no doubt that the driver of this route towards the Information Society is technology and technique, since this is what enables the increased productivity on which services depend. It is also an evolutionary conception, being presented as desirable and more or less smoothly achieved, the development model being North America. Francis Fukuyama published his controversial essay in 1989 and the book-length *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) shortly afterwards. The message here – capitalism has triumphed over communism – appears on the surface to be very different from that of Daniel Bell. Yet at root Fukuyama presents much the same thesis: it is productivity that changes the world, capitalism has won out because it out-produced communism, and thus the direction of history is firmly set. While Bell adopted the language of rationalization, Fukuyama prefers the terms of the market economy, yet in all essentials his analysis follows the same logic and trajectory as does Bell’s.

On any measure Bell’s account of Post-Industrial Society was an impressive achievement. Well before there was public interest in informational developments beyond the recondite realms of Library Science, he was presenting a serious and sustained analysis and explanation of the Information Society. It scarcely matters that, professionally, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* was savaged, theoretically and empirically (e.g. Gershuny 1978; Kumar 1978; Gershuny & Miles 1983). Bell had set the agenda to which critics had to respond. Moreover, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, events were happening outside academe that both made Bell seem especially perspicacious and impelled a response from Sociology.
The microelectronics revolution

Late in 1978, the then UK Prime Minister James Callaghan announced that the British people must ‘wake up’ to the microelectronics revolution. Accompanying this was a spate of television documentaries and paperback books with titles such as ‘The Chips are Down’, ‘Silicon Civilization’ and ‘The Mighty Micro’. The message was that an enormously significant technological breakthrough had been made (in a place gnomically evoked as ‘Silicon Valley’) and it was set to sweep away all in its path. In the metaphor of the popular futurist, Alvin Toffler (1980), this was comparable to a tidal wave that engulfs everything before it. Technology, we were told, was set to have impacts on society on a scale unknown since the Industrial Revolution (and there was indeed interminable talk of this being a ‘second industrial revolution’). The main concern – significantly so in view of more recent commentary – was with work and employment. Not surprisingly perhaps there was a rush of major impact predictions, and many of these were dire. Anticipated increases in productivity created apprehension for many. For instance, Clive Jenkins and Barrie Sherman (1979) predicted a ‘collapse of work’ before the 1990s (a theme refrained by Jeremy Rifkin [1995]). Even the optimists here foresaw a massive reduction in jobs, only then to remain cheerful by suggesting this might translate into a ‘leisure society’ provided that enlightened government increased wages, shortened working hours and increased holiday entitlements (Gorz 1982).

When the analyses were not doleful or apocalyptic (and for obvious reasons government and industry tended to embrace the ‘microelectronics revolution’), there was consensus that old-style jobs would go but an assurance that, in place of positions in coal-mining, steel works and manufacture, services would expand to take up the slack. Margaret Thatcher (1983), then politically pre-eminent in the UK, insisted that there would be ‘many, many jobs ... in the service industries’. Such interpretations were straightforwardly with Daniel Bell’s ‘march through the sectors’, even where his writing had not been consulted (Webster & Robins 1986).

My main point here is chiefly directed at commentary on what might be termed the societal, or macro, level. Whatever its particular takes, this operated within a technological determinist framework. The underlying premise was that technology caused social change, that microelectronics was an especially powerful technology and thus would have prodigious consequences (one popular metaphor was to describe microelectronics as a ‘heartland’ technology [Barron & Curnow 1979]), and that this technology, while itself asocial, more or less directly impacted on society. In this frame, some imagined the ‘collapse of work’ while others were convinced that services would come to the rescue.
Where did sociological research fit into this picture? Surprisingly little in the UK ventured onto the macro terrain. The major support agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), made funds available for research on the ‘microelectronics revolution’. It even established a programme called PICT (Programme in Information and Communications Technologies) that ran from 1985 for a decade. Perhaps it was the ESRC’s insistence that projects should offer policy guidance that contributed to increased competition by the nation that led to the sociological studies turning away from the big picture. Whatever the reason, what we got were focused and grounded projects concerned with matters such as innovations in banking, medical uses of technologies, regulatory regimes, women’s employment in offices and the introduction of technologies on the shop floor (Dutton 1996).

More interestingly, there was a marked reluctance amongst sociologists to accept the starting premise of the ESRC – that the microelectronics revolution was set to change the world, and that social science must study and advise upon adaptation to this innovation – which found expression in resistance to the technological determinist presumption of the funders (and so many others). Indeed, it became orthodoxy for sociologists, paid to study technology’s impacts, to reject the notion that technology caused social change (Dutton 1999). This sat with highly context-specific studies which demonstrated that technologies always incorporated values, that innovation was a highly negotiated affair, and that the presupposition of technology’s privileged role in bringing about social change was misplaced. Steve Woolgar (1996), one of the major and most insightful players in this game, noted the irony of there being a fierce rejection of technological determinism by researchers whose funding arrangements meant that we had ‘technological determinism in practice’ (p. 89). Nonetheless, while there were differences in approach between the ‘social shapers’ and the ‘social constructivists’, over this period social studies of technology boomed and, alongside, there was a consensus as regards technology being indivisible from the social. Bruno Latour’s (1993, 1996) ‘actor-network’ theory grew in popularity until it became the dominant theoretical perspective amongst researchers.

It is my view that this period saw, from the research community in Britain, the production of interesting, textured and localized studies. These demonstrated, time and again, that the technological determinism which underscored government debate and most other discussion of the ‘microelectronics revolution’ was intellectually weak. Nonetheless, what seems evident to me is that the research community at this time was unable to come up with any ‘big’ thinking as regards the character of change at the time. In sum, there was nothing to begin to match the scale and scope of Daniel Bell’s theory of Post-Industrial Society. Bell was certainly criticized by fine scholars (Kumar 1978), but Sociology was incapable of matching him with a positive and general analysis of contemporary social change.
The Network Society

This situation continued until the 1990s. Daniel Bell’s conception of a Post-Industrial Society was routinely criticized in the professional literature (Webster 1995, ch.3) for numerous inadequacies, but none offered an alternative. Meanwhile the research community most closely involved with researching informational matters by and large concerned itself with unambitious studies of particular localities while subscribing to social constructivism. Outside academe, even beyond the border of Sociology, others appeared content to embrace Bell’s conceptualization as the most appropriate for the current epoch.

Things changed with the publication of the remarkable trilogy of Manuel Castells (born February 1942), *The Information Age*, between 1996 and 1998. What Castells offered was worthy of succeeding and superseding Daniel Bell. *The Information Age* was distinctively ambitious in its endeavour to account for the major patterns of contemporary civilization, but it was also the work of a self-described and determinedly ‘empirical sociologist’ who wore his theoretical clothes lightly (Castells [2000] advocates ‘disposable theory’, theory being an essential tool, but something to be discarded when it becomes incapable of illuminating the substantive world). Castells’ achievement has received widespread praise as well as close criticism (Webster and Dimitriou 2004). In my view it is right that he is perceived to be standing in the tradition of Karl Marx and Max Weber, though I welcome *The Information Age* too as a worthy successor to Daniel Bell’s attempt to produce ambitious theoretical insights – abstract generalizations – based on detailed empirical evidence that capture the most consequential characteristics of our times. In this endeavour to paint the big picture of the world today, capturing its primary colours and its detail, it is noteworthy that Castells runs counter to the postmodern enthusiasm for specification, particularity and difference that expresses scepticism towards ‘grand narratives’.

Castells’ contribution coincided with the arrival of what I would call the second wave of technological enthusiasm – by which I mean to identify a torrent of comment that accompanied the development of information and communications technologies, the Internet especially, in the 1990s (Nagroponte 1995). This evoked memories of the first wave that had been manifested in the ‘mighty micro’ language of the late 1970s and early 1980s. I shall return to this, but for now would emphasize ways in which Castells’ work helped us reconceive the current era. His metaphor of the ‘network society’ and his detailing of ‘flows of information’ have helped us think more clearly of the mobilities of peoples, products and information in a globalizing world and it has been developed in the writings notably of John Urry (2000, 2003) and Scott Lash (2002). It is consonant with current interest in matters such as

Castells’ work also sits comfortably with a good deal of popular comment on information and communications technologies. His stress on the movement of information, such that nowadays we are reaching a situation of real-time action on a planetary scale, is well in line with technology-led images of an ‘information superhighway’, with excited talk about ‘connectivity’, and with all things digital (e.g. Mulgan 1997). But it is worth noting that Castells distances himself from technological determinism in important ways. For a start, he refuses Bell’s conception of Post-Industrialism as a novel society built on technological excess, referring instead to ‘informational capitalism’, thereby emphasizing the continuities of the present with the past. More interestingly, though Castells has a somewhat eclectic notion of information (and it is one that frequently does prioritize technology), in his trilogy he helps shifts attention away from the hardware to the softer side (i.e. from technologies towards human capital). This is especially so in his conception of ‘informational labour’ being the key category for the new age. This is the group in the ‘information age’ that manages, initiates and shapes affairs, by being well-educated, having initiative, welcoming the frenetic pace of change which typifies the current epoch, and having, perhaps above all, the capacity to ‘self-programme’ itself. Informational Labour jobs ‘embody knowledge and information’ (Castells 1997, ch. 6), and inevitably this group leads in research and development, in entrepreneurial activity, in finance, in media, even in alternative politics: everywhere it is on top, with its ease in initiating campaigns, in developing strategy, in connecting with other actors across the globe. It highlights ways in which work and living appear to be shifting towards flatter organizations, portfolio careers and living with continuous uncertainty. More than this, Informational Labour identifies what Lash and Urry (1994) termed ‘reflexive accumulation’, something that may be understood as information-intensive labour where the process and product are constantly scrutinized to be changed and revalued. This echoes Zuboff’s (1988) concern for the feedback loops established in modern production, the design intensity of so many products (the whole fashion industry, the branding of goods, companies and even people), the centrality of modern marketing, and the increased importance of cognitive employment (finance, business, consultancy etc.) as well as of creative work (few people seem to buy a kettle now, they want it to enhance their designer kitchen).

There are few measures of this transformation, though Castells does estimate that some 30 per cent of positions in OECD nations are concerned with informational labour. But it does gel with perceptions that, in the present era, imaginative and innovative people who are at ease with change are at a premium, and that those who are not – what Castells terms ‘routine
labour’ – are fatally disadvantaged and continuously threatened since their assumptions of and aspirations for stability (‘I want a steady job; I trained for this as a young man and expect to do it for the rest of my life’) are mistaken since ‘informational labour’ can and will redesign pretty well any form of repetitive work, either by automation or by reorganizing affairs on a world scale.

It bears repeating that this is not a technology-dominated approach to the Information Age. The ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) are part and parcel of ‘informational labour’s’ day-to-day functioning, but the key qualities are education, imagination, and capability to innovate (cf. Reich 1991). In terms of research agendas, Castells’ work helps shift attention away from technology impact studies towards new forms of stratification, changes in education systems (Robins & Webster 2002), new forms of political engagement (e.g. the organization and mobilization of campaigners such as anti-globalizers, environmentalists and human rights activists), changes in political parties and the conduct of politics (Bimber 2003), and contemporary forms of conflict such as information war (Webster 2003).

Culture and Cultural Studies

I have thus far argued that Daniel Bell’s conception of the Information Society was singular both in its intellectual sophistication and in its ambition to paint the big picture in sociological thinking during the 1970s. The first wave of technological enthusiasm did much to highlight the prescience of his work. In the UK the research on new technology was of much less ambition than that presented by Bell, being focused in approach, while routinely rejecting technological determinism. In the 1990s Manuel Castells’ notion of a ‘network society’ recalled the scale and scope of Daniel Bell. Castells’ offering coincided with the second wave of technological enthusiasm that was associated with ICTs and the Internet. Beside, and often beneath, these developments were two connected phenomena of major importance to Sociology itself and to analysis of how we live today. I refer to the exponential growth of culture and to the related spread of Cultural Studies to social analysis. Culture is of course a famously difficult term, but here I refer to the realm of the symbolic, the places where we discuss and decide about what and who we are, how we feel about ourselves and others, how we display ourselves to one another.

I do not think anyone would deny that there has been an enormous expansion of the symbolic over recent decades, something which involves technologies but which reaches far beyond. Think for instance of the expansion and digitalization of media such as satellite, television, radio, telecommunications, DVD, and latterly the Internet, such that nowadays symbols are
transmitted, sent and received pretty well anywhere, anytime and by anyone. One must add to this the huge growth of fashion and style (of the body, hair, face, clothing, ...), the spread of youth cultures, of different lifestyles, of advertising, of varied cultures that have accompanied migration, travel and tourism as well as the globalization process, and the plethora of brands which means that images of the Nike swoosh, David Beckham and Naomi Campbell are recognized round the globe. Much might be written on this subject, but here I simply announce the enormous growth of the cultural environment of people over the past few decades. This is evident in just about anything from the Walkman to the dress of multi-ethnic communities, from styling of the body to architectural design, from cityscapes to the variety of cuisine in any English town, from the composition of Premier League soccer to the decoration of living rooms. It is an inescapable feature of living in the twenty-first century — it is now inconceivable that one might live, as many once did, solely within one’s own culture, try as one might. Contemporary media, urban experiences and everyday matters of style demand that one immerses oneself, to a greater or lesser degree, in the diverse and hybrid cultural ambiances that surround us today. Unsurprisingly, identity — and identity politics — is of major concern in this milieu.

Cultural Studies has developed in response to these trends. Faced by so much more culture, and so much more varied cultures, there has been a pressing need for academe to engage. However, a reasonable question is: why did Sociology not develop to incorporate these matters from an early date? I would suggest several reasons (cf. Webster 2001). One is that Sociology seemed rather ‘slow’ when faced by the energy, dynamism and often-ephemeral character of cultural growth. Perhaps academic respectability, and professional institutionalization, played a part here. After all, in the 1960s Sociology was to the fore in accounting for things such as ‘moral panics’ and the ‘new criminology’. But the discipline had experienced hard times in the 1980s when government disparaged and starved it of funds, leaving Sociologists to hang on to whatever posts they had in universities. There were scarcely any new appointments in Sociology over that decade, and many talented postgraduates had to find employment in expanding areas such as Business Studies, Communications and — ironically — Cultural Studies that were open to new ideas and were vitalizing areas (Webster 2004). Such circumstances perhaps induced conservatism in the discipline, an urge to seek respectability that found expression in doing ‘solid’ work and insisting that the discipline adopted rigorous ‘scientific’ methods.

A second reason lies in the particular concern of British Sociology with the connected areas of work/occupation and production that were key elements of the prioritization of class analysis. Class analysis predominated in British Sociology in the postwar years right through to the late 1980s. This extended across the major paradigmatic divide — Marxism versus Weberianism — so
much that, looking back, we may see that a good many of those disputes (‘was class a matter of relations of production, or was it more to do with authority, or was it expressive of market situation?’) were largely internecine. The shared supposition was that class (and this was taken to be represented by the male head of household) was the primary source of a whole host of other phenomena. Hence from someone’s class (and most analysts in British Sociology worked on the assumption that class was a matter of occupational position, and that it was divisible into two categories, working and middle class) could be ‘read off’ a host of other factors — likelihood of educational success or failure, leisure habits, voting preferences, domestic relationships, choice of marriage partners and so on. Increasingly, this position came to be regarded as adopting a determinist approach to sociological subjects, even an essentialist account of the social world (‘at root class is what really matters’). Those who did not share its worldview became increasingly unhappy with Sociology. What attention was it paying, and what might it offer, say, to understanding of ‘race’ and ethnicity, gender relationships, media analysis (outside of news), shopping, sport, tourism or the manifest expansion of consumption that accompanied sustained increases in living standards (Obelkevitch 1994)?

In brief, culture had emerged, and continued to expand at breakneck speed, as a huge feature of contemporary life, but Sociology, perhaps excessively committed to class analysis, appeared to ignore it and, where the discipline did approach, tended to reduce culture to an expression of class circumstances that were themselves increasingly being subverted by the decline of manufacturing occupations, the growth of services, the participation of women in the labour force, and evidence that work was declining in significance as regards the experiences and identities of many people. In this light it was not altogether surprising that Ray Pahl (1989), one of the most eminent British sociologists in postwar Britain, exasperatedly declared that ‘class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology’ (p. 709) and that perhaps market researchers, with their categories such as DINKIES (dual income, no kids), GUPPIES (Greenpeace Yuppies), and WOOFs (well off older folk), were more insightful than the class concept beloved of the discipline.

Cultural Studies thrived on this expansion of culture and the inadequacies of Sociology. For instance, it was Cultural Studies that led the way in studying soap operas, in taking seriously fashion and clothing, in paying attention to race and the media, and in exploring hydridities. More than that, Cultural Studies characteristically paid attention not to the determinants of class to behaviour but to the active choices of actors, to the capacities of people, young and old, of varied ethnicities, to find pleasure and creativity in surprising areas. . . . In short, Cultural Studies highlighted the resistance of people to impositions of constricting circumstances.
Virtuality

This took place alongside the spread of what I termed earlier the second wave of technological enthusiasm, something associated especially with the coming of the Internet, but also in an especially rapid development of digital media, mobile telephony, and widespread awareness of the potential of genetics to transform the most intimate areas of life. It is clear that the spread of new media and ICTs was integral to the explosive growth of cultures. Cultural Studies did not, like its Sociologist counterparts, seek to assess the impacts of these new technologies. Such an approach was antipathetic to Cultural Studies’ concern to appreciate the creativity of people. Neither was Cultural Studies much drawn to social constructivism: such a proposition – that technologies were constitutive of human values – was so axiomatic to Cultural Studies that it scarcely seemed worthwhile labouring the point or applying it to particular situations. When it comes to issues such as cyborgs (cybernetic organisms), what is the point of arguing that humans and technology are melded? What is more exciting is what and how people are constituted and how they might reconstitute themselves in an era of spare-part surgery, cosmetic surgery, exercise regimes, body design and extensive use of drugs such as Viagra and Prozac.

Cultural Studies embraced this new technological ambiance as the milieu of virtuality, one in which emphasis is on the mediation of relations, their malleability, their artifice, and the constant possibilities of arrangements and imminent rearrangements. Not surprisingly, Cultural Studies paid a lot of attention to media in this situation, looking at media as a field of creativity and artifice, but foregrounding ways in which actors also could negotiate and find meaning in this rich symbolic seam. Elsewhere, we find with Cultural Studies strong resistance to notions of authenticity, indeed to any essentialist claims. Thereby it would examine realms of culture as necessarily manufactured, hence inauthentic, phenomena. For instance, tourism would be paid serious attention, the tourist experience being regarded not as the search for the ‘true’ history or peoples of a region, but rather as an artifice that all might appreciate, but still enjoy. Thus we have the ‘true’ Grecian taverna with its ice-cold beer, the carefully staged traditional dancing (complete with breaking of plates, costed and pre-purchased), the authentic Greek music played through the CD system and composed not a decade ago.... Everyone knows this is ersatz culture, but still it is enjoyable for the post-modern tourist (Urry 2002). What is characteristic of this, the ‘cultural turn’ that British social thinking has encountered in this last decade or so, is that it is acknowledged that everything is ‘virtual’ in the sense that it is socially manufactured, and this takes material forms, though no necessary constraint follows from this. Thus the tourist experience will vary enormously
depending on the ‘knowingness’ of the tourist. Again, urban reinvention is a material process – it involves new streets, new architecture and new ambiances – which are all about diverse and coexisting cultural expressions (cuisine, shops, entertainment, ...). But still people have enormous capacity to make sense of, and indeed shape, these in imaginative and unexpected ways.

Mark Slouka (1995) rebels against the excessive voluntarism of Cultural Studies, a subject that, in often converging postmodern sensibilities with new technology enthusiasm, represents ‘a mating of monsters’. I share unease at Cultural Studies’ willingness to ignore the real limits imposed on so many people today (Webster 2000). What might ‘virtuality’ offer the 1.3 billion people of the world existing on less than a dollar a day? Or the one in six who are illiterate? (United Nations 2002). And yet I cannot but recognize Cultural Studies’ capacity to open up social science to new areas of research that are demonstrably important in today’s world. Without it, I fear that Sociology would have continued to sideline interest in consumption, in media, in identity issues, in sexualities…. To be sure, Sociology has not been uninfluenced by Cultural Studies itself. The journal Theory, Culture and Society has been an important bridge linking Cultural Studies work and Sociology. In England the leading Cultural Studies figure, Stuart Hall (born 1933), came to occupy a chair in Sociology at the Open University and served two years as the British Sociological Association’s President in the 1990s, though his academic background is English Literature and he possesses no training in Sociology. Moreover, he has neither received awards from the ESRC nor does he publish his work in Sociology journals. There have been a few departments of Sociology, notably Lancaster, which have welcomed the ‘cultural turn’ and have seriously studied issues such as ‘heritage’ invention and environmental design in ways decidedly influenced by Cultural Studies. These are signs that Sociology is more willing to take on the insights of Cultural Studies, though it should be said that much suspicion and even antipathy remains, with Cultural Studies’ undoubtedly weaknesses in method (inadequate research design, proneness to solipsism ...) readily allowing wholesale rejection of the field.

**Conclusion**

I began this article with a tribute to Daniel Bell, to his conception of Post-Industrial Society, his attempt to present a ‘grand narrative’ that was sensitive to both theory and empirical observation. In the United Kingdom Sociology was pretty hostile to Bell, but when it came to respond to the ‘microelectronics revolution’ researchers could come up with nothing to match his work. To be sure, they rejected technological determinism tout court, and embraced social constructivism wholeheartedly (the ‘conservatives’ stuck
with ‘social shaping’ approaches to technology), but none could present a persuasive alternative account of ‘how we are now’. On the contrary, sociological research that was undertaken in this arena was, by and large, determinedly local, small-scale and particular.

In the 1990s Manuel Castells revitalized the mode of analysis first offered by Daniel Bell. *The Information Age*, with its metaphors of ‘networks’ and ‘flows’, is a major achievement. Its stress on the category ‘informational labour’ does much to shift away from technological determinism without abandoning the big picture. The trilogy has already had an important influence on researchers, for instance in analysis of ‘electronic communities’ and ‘information warfare’. Of course, the critical mice have been quick to gnaw at various aspects of *The Information Age*, but few have been able to inflict serious damage.

It should be emphasized that macro analysis per se is not superior (and the term ‘macro’ itself misses the intimate connectedness with the substantive that I would want to insist upon). One needs look no further than the ridiculously assured statements that came, and continue to come, from futurists to recognize that ‘big picture’ accounts are not inherently better. It is the combination of rich empirical analysis and its complex relations with wider contexts and conceptualizations (themselves subject to rigorous empirical scrutiny) that does seem to me superior to studies which remain, as it were, with their intellectual blinkers fixing them on the merely particular. Such studies can be fascinating, and they may demonstrate the intricacy of human/technology relations, but they do little more than this, confirming only the truistic ‘life is complicated, contingent and constantly created’.

But Sociology has been somewhat outpaced by Cultural Studies when it comes to examination of the culture and cultural changes that have been such a key feature of our time. Cultural Studies has seized on *virtuality* to address some of the most arresting issues of the contemporary epoch — sexualities, the body, pervasive media experiences, identities... In this it has been ahead of Sociology. Though some of the discipline has welcomed the ‘cultural turn’ there has also been fierce resistance from other parts (cf. Goldthorpe 2000). Significantly, Steve Woolgar’s (2002) edited collection, *Virtual Society?*, evidenced sympathy and sensitivity towards Cultural Studies concerns, highlighting some of the discipline’s openness in recent years.

Nonetheless, it should not be entirely surprising to come across agreement between social constructivist analyses of technology and Cultural Studies, since both stress the malleability of relationships and the importance of particularities. Moreover, there are commonalities of epistemology and method that further encourage agreement. In spite of this convergence, still I remain disappointed with the common failure of much sociological research on ICTs and Cultural Studies to address wider questions of change. One does understand wariness of facile generalization, still more of
forms of functionalism that have bedevilled a good deal of macro-analysis in the past, especially that which limits itself to armchair theorizing and/or abstracts technology from the substantive realm while asserting that this technology is the primum mobile of change. So one is not calling here for a social analysis capable of grandly explaining everything. Rather the plea is for accounts that, empirically testable and conceptually sensitive, strive to identify the most consequential characteristics of how we live. This is necessarily a contested affair, involving debate between arguments and evidence, but it is not a hopelessly subjective task. It also requires some notion of the interconnectedness of phenomena, not to subsume them into a presupposed whole but that we may struggle towards studies that make the most consequential features of the world we inhabit evident and comprehensible (cf. Preston 2001; Schuler & Day 2004). No amount of localized ethnographies, however rewarding in themselves, can replace the need for social science to aspire and attempt to reach the levels of Daniel Bell and Manuel Castells.

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Notes

1 An intriguing division amongst scholars who rejected technological determinism at this time was discernible. On the one side were critics, often outside higher education, who aligned typically with Marxist traditions to stress ways in which technological innovation advantaged sectional interests by presenting change as a merely technical (hence untouched by social values) matter, while incorporating their own values into new technologies that disadvantaged workers especially. David Noble (1977, 1984), David Dickson (1974, 1984), Steven Rose, and Robert Young and Les Levidow (with the journal they pioneered, Science as Culture), were key players in this school that situated technology in the wider milieu of capitalist endeavour. On the other side were the social constructivists, overwhelmingly employed in universities, who, while sharing the premise that technology (and science) is inherently social, were committed to localized and textured studies of innovation such as laboratory relationships and the nuances of producing software. These were influenced by ethnomethodology and associated forms of micro and interpretivist philosophy. Prominent amongst
them were Steve Woolgar (1988), John Law (1991), and Wiebe Bijker (Bijker et al., 1989), while pre-eminent was Bruno Latour.

It seems that the two sides, while agreeing on the limits of orthodox approaches to technology, scarcely spoke to one another; they rarely cited writings from respective schools. Social constructivists focused on producing ethnographic micro studies and became the dominant force in ESRC-funded research in the UK. Perhaps they found the ‘politicos’ too crude and reductionist for their tastes, likely to manifest what Woolgar (2002) calls ‘clumping tendencies’ (p. 6) that did a disservice to the complexities of change. With a few noteworthy exceptions (cf. MacKenzie 1998), researchers in the UK ignored the likes of Noble and Young and favoured social constructivism, eclipsing their followers when it came to research funding.

References


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