CHAPTER THREE

THE SECOND EMPIRE OF SPEED: NETWORKED SOCIETY

*Globalization cannot take shape without the speed of light.*

Paul Virilio, 2000

Précis

The network society is the speed society *par excellence*. It takes capitalism up to a new level of technological sophistication and global domination. Digital capitalism represents a new form of production and consumption that is based upon flexibility and adaptability and what Castells sees as a new form of social organization ‘aimed at the suppression of space and the annihilation of time’ (1996:471). In other words, it is oriented towards pure speed. This chapter looks at the dynamics of this networked society. It considers what precisely drives it and what the economic and social effects are. Based upon the instrumental inflexibility of Leibnizian binary code, the network society has developed into a ‘closed space’, closed to all but those flexible and efficient processes and applications that are geared toward the production commodities and the seeking of profit. It is a network of networks that is given ‘life’ through the infrastructure of the Internet, and increasingly sophisticated forms of computing, which serves to colonize other realms of life and other ways of thinking. Importantly, this closed and colonized realm, this Empire, generates its own form of temporality, a ‘network time’ that is a qualitatively different form of time from its technological predecessor, the time of the clock.

*Digital networks: the intensification of complexity*

As an ossifying Fordism was being transformed and reenergized, the governing time of the clock was being supplanted. Today, neoliberal globalization and the information technology revolution, processes that detonated into life in the late 1970s as a solution to the perceived inflexibility of Fordism, are rapidly creating the second Empire of Speed. All empires inevitably crumble, or shrink, or become irrelevant and
wither away. And so it is that the temporal empire that was metered by the clock, and helped generate the Enlightenment, modernity and industrialization is now being superseded. The rule of the clock as the even and constant regulator and scheduler of societies and industries around a world divided into time zones no longer fits with the new Information Age. The old model is now too slow in its maturity and has outlived its usefulness as a generator of profit. Today a new form of temporality is becoming dominant: this is ‘network time’. It is founded on, and arises up from, the proliferation of digital networks. These are networks that are based on a singular logic, but importantly they also generate open-ended and multi-speed processes and applications.

In these early years of the 21st century, the pursuit of open-ended speed is unabated. It is a restless need for speed that touches everything and changes everything. To borrow from Marx and Engels who described the revolutionary vitality of the genesis of the previous clock-based Empire of Speed: ICT-driven speed processes ‘…must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’ (1975:38). Marx and Engels had in mind, primarily, Western Europe and North America, whereas today ‘everywhere’ means just that—from the pristine temperature-and dust-controlled labs of Silicon Valley and Bangalore, to the rather more disordered and grimy temples of commerce in Shenzhen or London or New York or Jakarta, the dynamic of acceleration pervades—pushing individuals and societies forward and pushing them faster.

This transformation could not have occurred through the ideology of neoliberalism alone; neither could the world be as it is today, merely through the agency of innovation in the computer sciences. It had to be a joint social and technological revolution—one feeding the other and in turn being fed by it. The capitalist need for ‘connections everywhere’ to boost trade and increase production is given far greater scope by information technologies; the corollary being that the need to increase efficiencies in trade and production triggers massive investment into ICTs. ICTs today moreover are developed specifically with connectivity in mind—if it doesn’t connect then it is essentially of no great use. The effect is that each application or device represents a connection to a connection to yet another in a process that ramifies across industries and through everyday life in the construction of a networked society.

Castells observed that: ‘The information technology revolution, and the restructuring of capitalism, has induced a new form of society, the