Millennial post-Marxism

With the fin of the last siècle coinciding with the end of the millennium, apocalyptics abound. Using the year 2000 – or what Neil Smith wryly calls that 'arbitrary moment of time ... fixed with epochal significance' – as an excuse, there has been no shortage of dystopian visions of our global future to choose from.¹ And not all of these conform to the familiar 'end of the world is nigh' scenario so beloved of fringe religious groups. Even secular types like me – devotees of that weasel-word 'reason', who purport to offer sober, empirically-substantiated appraisals of current political-economic, cultural and environmental realities – can succumb to the temptations of chiliastic thought. Such thought usually has two key characteristics. First, it suggests that the new millennium represents a temporal break in human affairs, a qualitative shift into a new era. Second, it proposes to account for that shift with reference to an overarching explanatory framework of greater or lesser complexity and sophistication.

Over a decade in the making, Manuel Castells's three-volume opus – The Information Age – is a secular millennialism in both these senses. Its secularism derives from the post-Marxist ideas which inform it. As a one-time structural Marxist, and as a firm believer 'in the possibility of calling upon reason' (p. 4), Castells's vision of a new era dominated by information technologies is based on a blend of historical materialism and insights drawn from a dazzling array of conceptual sources, from science and technology studies to new social movement theory. Framed by this critical and rationalist vision, the millennialism of The Information Age stems from Castells's thesis of a world 'fundamentally altered' (p. 1), a sea-change he seeks to explain using a theory so encompassing that it takes in economic globalisation, the decline of Soviet state communism, the proliferation of international organised crime networks and the zapatista movement (to name but a few). Eschewing the post-modern penchant for petit-rêts, Castells's three


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volumes stretching to almost 1500 theoretically, thematically and empirically dense pages thus belong to the now much criticised genre of meta-theory. In other words, The Information Age proposes to do exactly what its subtitle suggests: namely, to bring the contemporary dynamics of glocal economy, society and culture within the explanatory logic of one overarching theoretical framework.

The Information Age is, then, an audacious even arrogant trilogy. Anthony Giddens has already compared it favourably to Weber's Economy and Society in terms of its scope and what Frank Webster calls its 'agenda setting' potential. In an interesting and deliberate counterpoint to Giddens, Jim McGuigan argues instead that The Information Age 'may come to be seen as Das Kapital of our time'. This not only implies that The Information Age seeks to hold on to Marxian ideas and thereby offer an explicit challenge to those many Leftists who today think Marxism is passé. More than this, it also implies that The Information Age in some sense actively updates and reworks Marxism in order to show its continued theoretical power and political relevance as we enter a new millennium.

In my comments below, I propose to disagree strongly with McGuigan's suggestion that Castells's three volumes are a modern equivalent of Marx's. For it seems to me that Castells's millennial impulses ultimately work against his Marxist instincts. After a précis of The Information Age, I flesh out this claim in four ways. First, I will suggest that Castells's epochal arguments about the novelty of the information age threaten to spill over into an untenable vision of a post-capitalist world redolent of those proposed by several non-Marxist theoreticians of the information society - theoreticians Castells otherwise dissents from, such as Daniel Bell and Alvin Toffler. Second, though Castells's faith in the continued relevance of grand theory seems to align him with stalwart Marxists like his former friend David Harvey, the Marxism of The Information Age is, I will show, vestigial at best. In its place, thirdly, a mixture of technological determinism and what critical realists would call 'chaotic conceptions' combine to form a theoretical mélange which is both over-ambitious and lacking the explanatory power and analytical sharpness of Marx's original anatomisation of capitalism. Finally, I also want to claim that Castells both underplays the continued relevance of class politics and the enduring power of social agency. As a result, The Information Age ends up telling us a good deal about new modes and powers of information production, distribution and exchange but rather little about what Castells calls 'informational