Understanding the Information Age: The Uneasy Relations between Sociology and Cultural Studies in Britain

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Abstract
In the United Kingdom there has been a discernable shift away from interest in the Information Society towards concern with the character of Cyberspace and Virtuality. In key ways this reorientation reflects the rise of Cultural Studies and its impatience with aspects of Sociology. This article explores aspects of the relations between these two subject areas and difficulties in understanding and explaining contemporary change. It is suggested that Cultural Studies has outpaced Sociology in its response to recent changes.

Keywords
Information Society, Cultural Studies, Sociology, virtuality, cyberspace, technological determinism
Introduction

In this article I reflect on approaches to, and issues about, information and ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies)—distinguishing features of the world we inhabit—particularly in light of the tense relations between Sociology and Cultural Studies over the past twenty years or so. My focus is the United Kingdom, where I have been employed for most of that time in higher education, though I believe that the thrust of the argument holds true beyond Britain. I shall suggest that there has been a discernable shift, amongst students of change, away from interest in the Information Society (a term defined by and from Sociology) towards concern with the character of Cyberspace and Virtuality which in key ways reflects the rise of Cultural Studies and its impatience with Sociology and the latter’s inability to keep pace with the dynamism of contemporary change.

The Information Society

The notion of the Information Society has wide currency inside 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.

Interestingly, the popularity of the terms within the G8 economies, the European Union, and the United Nations (note, for example, the current World Forum on the Information Society held in Geneva late in 2003), is an instance of the practical effect of sociological thinking. Too often Sociologists, because their influence can rarely be directly assessed, appear to feel that the discipline has little practical consequence, and as a result subordinate themselves to subjects such as Engineering and Economics. The pervasive adoption of the term Information Society can be regarded as nothing other than instancing Sociology’s profound influence on our ways of life. This is integral to how we think as well as how we act, from the level of the personal (“how can I equip
myself with skills to prosper in this sort of society?"), to the wider realm of government polices ("there is no point in shoring up coalmining and manufacturing industries because we are now in the Information Society").

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 U.S.-centric (Ross; Steinfels). 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—and as close—as Max Weber and Georg Lukacs, that Hungarian enigma whose work is simultaneously so appealing and repellent to Bell [cf. Bell, "First Love," "After the age"]). 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 inconsequential 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 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 high theory. By this I mean to signal the enthusiasm in Sociology, during the late 1960s and 1970s, for theory that merged with (or perhaps more accurately aped) Philosophy, stuck to an intensely abstract level of analysis, and determinedly resisted coming to terms with empirical matters. One might recall here that Parsons’s Structural Functionalism was weakening its hold by this time, but the heavy-weight alternative in Sociology came in the shape of Louis Althusser’s Structural Marxism, while for the less ideologically committed the later Wittgenstein had considerable appeal. In Sociology there was a widespread contempt for mere “empiricism,” something dismissed as a naïve 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 generalisation. 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. But it was an insistence that generalisations should be informed by evidence rather than philosophical speculation (Mouzelis) and it had a good deal in common with
Robert Merton’s 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, C. Wright Mills, A. H. Halsey and Ralph Miliband. It is, in my view, an admirable tradition, one aiming to produce statements of widespread significance about the character of societies while committed to ensuring that theories are substantively grounded. It is a tradition I would commend.

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, From Post-Industrial 26). That is, he argued that over time one could see a transfer of most people gaining 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 says, “what counts (now) is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information” (The Coming of Post-Industrial Society 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 working the land (and this process began with the Agricultural Revolution in the eighteenth century), then surplus labour can be transferred to industrial occupations while assured of having sufficient food. Through time, continuous increases in agricultural productivity has 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 3% or so of the workforce in Europe and the U.S. 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, then services 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 thirty-five years ago!) a Post-Industrial Society may come 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 purity.

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* shortly afterwards in 1992. The message here—capitalism has triumphed over communism—appears on the surface to be very different to 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 rationalisation, Fukuyama preferred the terms of the market economy, yet in all essentials his analysis follows the same logic and trajectory as does Bell.

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 (cf., Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress*; Gershuny, *After Industrial Society*; Gershuny and Miles). 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 1979, the then U.K. Prime Minister James Callaghan announced that the British people must “wake up” to the microelectronics revolution. Accompanying this was a wave of television documentaries and paperback books with titles such as “The Chips Are Down” and “The Mighty Micro.” The message was that an enormously significant technological breakthrough had been made (in a mysterious place called “Silicon Valley”) and it was set to sweep away all in its path. In the metaphor of the popular futurist, Alvin Toffler, 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 predicted a “collapse of work” before the 1990s (a theme refrained by Jeremy Rifkin). Even the optimists here foresaw a massive re-duction in jobs, only then to remain cheerful by suggesting this might translate into a “leisure society” provided enlightened government, increased wages, shortened work-ing hours, and increased holiday entitlements (Gorz).

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, then politically pre-eminent in the U.K., insisted that there would be “many, many jobs [...] in the service industries” (2). Such interpretations
were consonant with Daniel Bell’s “march through the sectors,” even where his writing had not been consulted (Webster and Robins, *Information Technology*).

I am talking here chiefly about commentary at 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 and Curnow]), 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 U.K. 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 which contributed to increased competition of 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, *Information and Communication Technologies*).

More interestingly, there was a reluctance amongst sociologists to accept the starting premise of the ESRC—that the microelectronics revolution was set to change the world, 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 came orthodoxy for sociologists, paid to study technology’s impacts, to reject the notion that technology caused social change (Dutton, *Society on the Line*). This sat comfortably with highly context-specific studies that 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, one of the major 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 “techno-
logical determinism in practice” (“Technologies as Cultural Artifacts” 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, with it, there was a consensus as regards technology being indivisible from the social. Bruno Latour’s “actor-network” theory (We Have Never Been Modern; Aramis) grew in popularity until it became the dominant theoretical perspective amongst researchers.

It is my view that this period saw, from the research community, the production of interesting, textured and localised studies. These demonstrated, time and again, that the technological determinism, which underlined 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 (nor even the popular futurism of Alvin Toffler). Bell was certainly criticised by fine scholars (Kumar, Prophecy and Progress), 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 Post-Industrial Society was routinely criticised in the professional literature (Webster, Theories of the Information Society, chapter 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 conceptualisation 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 Daniel Bell. The Information Age was distinctively ambitious in its endeavour to account for the major patterns of contemporary civilisation, but it was also the work of a self-described and determinedly “empirical
sociologist” who wore his theoretical clothes lightly (Castells advocates “disposable
theory” [“Materials”], theory being an essential tool, but something to be discarded
when it becomes incapable of illuminating the substantive world). Castells’s achieve-
ment has received widespread praise as well as close criticism (see Webster and
Dimitriou’s Manuel Castells for a comprehensive account). 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 generalisations—based on detailed
empirical evidence which 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 post-modern
enthusiasm for specification, particularity and difference that expresses such scepti-
cism towards “grand narratives.”

Castells’s 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 (Negroponte). 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 emphasise ways in which
Castells’s 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 globalising world and it has
been developed in the writings notably of John Urry (Sociology beyond Societies;
Global Complexity) and Scott Lash (Critique of Information). It is consonant with
current interest in matters such as “electronic communities,” “e-democracy,” “diasporas,”
“urban cultures,” and the emergence of “symbolic politics.”

Castells’s work also sits comfortably with a good deal of popular comment on
information and communications technologies. His stress on the movement of informa-
tion, 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 super-
highway,” with excited talk about “connectivity,” and with all things digital (e.g.,
Mulgan). 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 emphasising the continuities of the present with
the past. More interestingly, though Castells has a somewhat eclectic notion of information (and it is one which frequently does prioritise technology), in his trilogy he helps shift 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” which 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, *The Power of Identity*, chapter 6), and inevitably it 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 organisations, portfolio careers, and living with continuous uncertainty. More than this, Informational Labour identifies what Lash and Urry termed “reflexive accumulation” (*Economies of Signs and Space*), something that may be understood as information-intensive labour where the process and product are constantly scrutinised to be changed and revalued. This echoes Zuboff’s 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, the increased importance of cognitive employment (finance, business, consultancy, etc.) as well as of creative work (no one buys a kettle now; people want it to enhance their designer kitchen).

There are few measures of this transformation, though Castells does estimate that some 30% 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 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 redesign pretty well any form of repetitive work, either by automation or reorganising affairs on a world scale. Richard Florida’s depiction of the rise of the “creative class,” to occupy now one in three of jobs in the U.S., might be exaggerated, but it places a similar stress on innovation, communication and “think work” as does Castells.
It bears repeating that this is not a technology-dominated approach to the Information Age. Of course, 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). In terms of research agendas, Castells’s work helps shift attention away from technology impact studies towards new forms of stratification, changes in education systems (Robins and Webster), new forms of political engagement (e.g., the organisation and mobilisation of campaigners such as anti-globalisers, environmentalists, and human rights activists), changes in political parties and the conduct of politics (Bimber), and contemporary forms of conflict such as information war (Webster, “Information Warfare”).

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 U.K. 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’s notion of a “network society” recalled the scale and scope of Daniel Bell. Castells’s offering coincided with the second wave of technological enthusiasm that 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 digitalisation of media like 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 has accompanied migration, travel and tourism as well as the globalisation process, and the plethora of brands which means that images of Nike, Beckham and Campbell are recognised instantly 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 immerse 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 Sociology did not develop to incorporate these matters. I would suggest several reasons (Webster “Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Disciplinary Boundaries”). 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 institutionalisation, 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 had to find employment in areas such as Business Studies because nothing at all was available in mainstream departments). 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 prioritisation of class analysis. Class analysis predominated in British Sociology in the
post-War 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 deal of those disputes (“was class a matter of relations to production, or was it more to do with authority?”) was internecine. The shared supposition was that class (and this was taken to be 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 to, 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? In brief, culture had emerged, and continued to expand at breakneck speed, as a huge feature of contemporary life, but Sociology, 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 entirely unexpected that Ray Pahl, one of the most eminent British sociologists in post-War Britain, exasperatedly declared that “class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology” (709) and that perhaps market researchers with their catchy labels offered more insight into differentiated hierarchies than the homogenising class categories preferred of the discipline. Terms such as DINKIES (dual incomes, no kids), YUPPIES (young upwardly mobile professional person), JOLLIES (jet-setting oldies with lots of loot), TWEENIES (those between 5 and 12), GUPPIES (Greenpeace Yuppies), MINKIES (middle income, no kids),

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1 Since 1950 average real disposable income has quadrupled in Britain. It finds expression in widespread car ownership, in home furnishings and domestic technologies, in entertainment goods and services, in holiday take-up, in access to varied and fashionable clothing (Obelkevitch).
“empty nesters” (still fully employed, but whose children had left home, freeing space and income even if carrying feelings of loss and confusion), and WOOFs (well off older folk), may be off-puttingly slick, but they also resist the simplifications of encompassing concepts such as “working” and “middle” class.

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. 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 in surprisingly areas.... In short, to resist the impositions of constricting circumstances.

**Virtuality**

This took place alongside the spread of what I termed above 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 were integral to the explosive growth of cultures. Cultural Studies did not, like their 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.

Cultural Studies rather 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 rearrange-
ments. Not surprisingly, Cultural Studies paid a lot of attention to media in this situation, looking at it 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 which 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, carefully 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 by the post-modern tourist (Urry, The Tourist Gaze). What is characteristic of this, the “cultural turn” that British social thinking has encountered 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 these in imaginative and unexpected ways.

Mark Slouka rebels against the excessive voluntarism of Cultural Studies, a subject that, in often converging post-modern sensibilities with new technology enthusiasm, represents “a mating of monsters” (30). I share unease at Cultural Studies’ willingness to ignore the real limits imposed on so many people today (Webster, “Virtual Culture”). What might “virtuality” offer the 1.3 billion people of the world existing on less than a dollar a day? Or the 1 in 6 who are illiterate? (United Nations). And yet I cannot but recognise 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 was elected British Sociological Association 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 more Sociology is willing to take on the insights of Cultural Studies, though it should be said that much suspicion and even antipathy remains, with Cultural Studies’ undoubted weaknesses in method (there is an excessive commitment to simple-minded “ethnography” in Cultural Studies and a facile rejection in Cultural Studies of quantitative methods) readily allowing whole-scale rejection of the field by hostile critics.

**Conclusion**

I began this article with a tribute to Daniel Bell’s 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, and Europe more generally, 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 more intellectually conservative stuck with “social shaping” approaches to technology), but none could present a persuasive alternative account of “how we are now.”

In the 1990s Manuel Castells revitalised the mode of analysis first offered by Daniel Bell. *The Information Age*, with its metaphors of “networks” and “flows,” is a major achievement. Moreover, 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,” new social movements, and “information warfare.” To be sure, critical mice have been quick to gnaw at various aspects of *The Information Age*, but few have been able to inflict serious damage.
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. Much Sociology remained rooted in class analysis, suspicious of apparently ephemeral change, and over-committed to traditional methodological approaches. In contrast, 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.... The subject seems to me especially well situated to provide better understanding of mobilities, of the flows of people (travellers, tourists, migrants of all sorts), products (from the global brands to PCs designed and manufactured in several countries), and information (from rolling news to corporate communications, from satellite broadcasting to the Internet), and the routine transformations and reinventions that are made, which are so central to how we live today. In this Cultural Studies has been ahead of Sociology. Though some of the discipline has welcomed the “cultural turn”—Manuel Castells himself, though a self-described sociologist, maintains an admirable openness to contributions from the likes of Baudrillard and McLuhan—there has also been resistance from other parts. Sadly, some of Britain’s most able and admired sociologists have been amongst the most trenchant opponents, adopting aggressive and dismissive criticism of those thought to have brought the discipline into “disarray” (Goldthorpe 1). I do not feel such hard-line and exclusionary responses to the “cultural turn” help scholars better understand and explain the Information Age.

Works Cited


About the Author

Frank Webster is Professor of Sociology, City University London. He was educated at Durham University (BA, 1972; MA, 1974) and the LSE (Ph.D., 1978). He was Professor of Sociology at Oxford Brookes University from 1990 to 1998 and at the University of Birmingham from 1999 to 2002. His recent books include Culture and Politics in the Information Age: A New Politics? (Routledge, 2001); The Virtual University?: Knowledge, Markets and Managements, with Kevin Robins (Oxford UP, 2002); Theories of the Information Society, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002); Environmentalism, 5 vols, edited with David Pepper and George Revill (Routledge, 2002); Manuel Castells, 3 vols, edited with Basil Dimitriou (Sage, 2003); The Intensification of Surveillance: Crime, Terrorism and Warfare in the Information Age, edited with Kirstie Ball (Pluto, 2003); and The Information Society Reader (Routledge, 2004).

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