

Working-Class Network Society

Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China

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Foreword

This truly original book investigates the cultural, social, and institutional specificity of the network society in China while having broader theoretical implications. The network society is the social structure that characterizes the information age, as the industrial society characterized the industrial age. It is a social structure based on networks of communication, business, work, culture, sociability, science and technology, social movements, and politics. The networking form of organization is as old as the history of humankind but only recently became the predominant form of social organization because it harnesses the power of the revolution in microelectronics-based information and communication technologies that constituted a new technological paradigm in the 1970s and expanded in the twenty-first century into the global network of communication around the Internet (1.3 billion users in 2008) and wireless communication networks (3.4 billions subscribers in 2008).

Networks have no boundaries, so the network society is a global network society. Globalization is organized around a network of global networks. Globalization *is* the network society in its concrete manifestation. Networks are operated by the programs social actors inscript in their structures, always through conflict and always open to challenges from other social actors whose interests are ill represented in the network's program. In the current global network society, everything that has value according to the network's program is included in the network, wherever it is on the planet. Anything or anyone who has no value or becomes devalued is excluded from the network in a variable geometry of global dynamism and local despair. So the architecture of our world is composed of networks that include and exclude territories and people to form the uneven profile of globalization. Thus, all societies to some extent are network societies because their dominant sectors and functions everywhere are connected to the global network of networks from where they obtain access to wealth,

information, and power. Furthermore, those who are not included in the networks are nonetheless defined in their existence by their exclusion and their drive to survive by creating alternative networks, be it the global criminal economy or networks of resistance to the dominant order.

The fact that the network society is global, bypassing in its dynamics the boundaries defined by the nation-state, is not tantamount to global social homogeneity. *The world is not flat*. The market is, but societies, cultures, and institutions that have been produced differentially by their historical and geographical specificity, by their identification in time and space, are not. Therefore, every society is at the same time a network society in its social structure and a specific network society in terms of its culture, institutions, and specific location in the international division of labor and in the world structure of power relationships. This is what a number of researchers from a variety of countries documented in the book I edited and coauthored in 2004, examining the network society in a cross-cultural perspective (Castells 2004). Jack Qiu takes this analysis one step further. He analyzes the specificity of the network society in China and proposes the concept of working-class network society. It may sound odd at first, as all innovative concepts do. But it becomes almost evident if we relate it to the usual vision that we have of China today. Most analysts agree that China is the manufacturing powerhouse of the planet in this early part of the century. What Western Europe was in the nineteenth century and the United States and Japan were in the twentieth century is China today: the industrial factory of the world. But this factory is networked to the entire global economy and is organized around the informational mode of development. It manufactures goods by incorporating information and knowledge into the labor process.

Thus, class divisions appear on the basis of differential access to and control of information processing tasks, ultimately embodied in differential access to information and communication technologies, at work and in life. The irony of history has located the largest exploited working class of the global information age in the last communist state inherited from the industrial era.

This book provides a systematic analytical framework to study both the differential dynamics of the global network society and the processes of new inequality and class formation in the context of informationalism. It relies on firsthand fieldwork research in China, documentary and statistical analysis, and a deep knowledge of the scholarly literature on global technological transformations. It opens a new path of inquiry that researchers and students around the world will follow. It also challenges us to think

normatively and to shake up our detachment when contemplating the sea of injustice and human suffering that characterizes a process of economic growth and technological innovation that probably dwarfs the human drama of previous industrializations. Professor Qiu takes us away from the blind technological optimism of vendors of the future and into the harsh territory of the exploitative and exclusionary information age.

Manuel Castells
Santa Monica, California
March 2008