

A Conversation with Manuel Castells

Transcript and Introduction by Mukul Kumar

On October 25, 2013, the Berkeley Planning Journal hosted Professor Manuel Castells in a round-table discussion with doctoral and master's students from the Department of City and Regional Planning. Professor Castells is a leading expert worldwide in the social sciences. He is Professor Emeritus of City and Regional Planning and of Sociology at UC Berkeley, where he taught from 1979 to 2003. The Spanish sociologist is a prominent scholar and researcher in the fields of urban planning, communication, globalization, and information society, and currently holds the Wallis Annenberg Chair in Communication Technology and Society at the University of Southern California.

The round-table discussion coincided with Professor Castells's lecture at the College of Environmental Design entitled "Space of Flows and Space of Places in Networked Social Movements" and follows the publication of his most recent book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012). Both the lecture and the discussion focused on Castells's most recent work on new forms of social movements and protests that are erupting across the world, from the Arab uprisings to the indignadas of Spain and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Jake Wegmann served as the discussion moderator.

Jake Wegmann: *Could you start by defining what you mean by the terms "autonomy" and "space of autonomy"?*

Manuel Castells: You have started with the most difficult and important question. Autonomy means the capacity of people, either individually or collectively, to organize their lives in terms of their projects, desires, and needs without having to submit to whatever rules are established by institutions. When people assert their autonomy through social movements, institutions emerge to reconcile these projects and desires. After institutions emerge, there is a constant process of negotiation between people within and outside institutions.

The more these institutions reflect the constant change in the values and interests in society the more these institutions do not need to be constantly challenged. This situation translates into delegation and trust in these institutions. When trust is lost, when people no longer believe in these institutions, then there is a dramatic moment. It is a dramatic moment because there is a split among the people in society. The institutions take on a life of their own; this is called bureaucracy. The money is managed

by people who we cannot control. Politics is captured by an insulated professional class. Citizens become consumers of politics in the markets of elections every four years, if ever. Therefore at some point a number of spontaneous social protests come into being that challenge institutions. At this moment, it is critical for people to have the ability to reconstruct their autonomy in horizontal terms. Now, for this to happen, it is not enough for individuals to feel this way and challenge the system by themselves. It is essential for them to have public space, understood as an always-provisional space of deliberation in which people can come together and project what they want to do, through trial and error. This has been the same process throughout history. What is specific about our society is that public space combines places and mobile networks. The interaction and reciprocal reinforcement of these two kinds of public spaces makes the space of deliberation much more powerful because you have at the same time the forms of being together in place with the constant interaction in mobile communication networks. This combination of urban public space and cyberspace is what I call the space of autonomy.

Chris Mizes: *Could you elaborate on why forms of public space are necessary for social change? Why isn't it enough to simply organize on the Internet?*

MC: Public space is necessary to project new values, ideas, and proposals to society at large. In the protests of Belo Horizonte this summer [2013] there was a wonderful guy who held a banner by himself saying: "I was born in Facebook. Now I am in the street." The banner that opened the demonstration in Rio de Janeiro, in which tens of thousands of people participated, said: "We are the social networks." There is a constant affirmation and movement between urban public space and mobile communication networks. If Internet is not present in neighborhoods, workplaces, streets, then only a particular segment of society—those active in forms of Internet deliberation—are present. For the 99 percent to be aware of the debate, it has to be located in the square, workplace, neighborhood, and so forth. The network is a place from which new projects can emerge and new initiatives can be taken in society.

JW: *To follow up on this question, would you say that the Internet is a form of public space?*

MC: The Internet is a specific kind of public space that is defined by permanent connectivity and horizontality. There are 6.9 billion wireless device subscribers on the planet and the Internet has 2.7 billion users. Of course, connection to the Internet is extremely uneven. The Internet is an extremely flexible form of public space: if one node goes out, then the network can reconfigure itself. Still, we cannot eliminate gathering in places, though this has long been the dream of science-fiction writers and some Silicon Valley corporations. It is the nature of human beings

to be in places, touch each other, and share with on another. There is no contradiction in being in places and on the Internet.

Matt Wade: *I wanted to switch gears to a discussion of how the local relates to the global. How do global informational networks relate to concepts of local resistance?*

MC: Let's take the example of Anonymous, which is particularly important. This is a movement that is local and global at the same time. Most of the major movements nowadays are both; they act on specific local issues, but they are all connected. They can act where power is, which is at the global level. I have always been critical of the notion of "think global; act local." Since power operates through a global network, we should think locally and act globally. We have to act against global networks of finance and the coalitions of government that take power away from people. Social and cultural roots in places enable people to construct alternative possibilities, organize locally, and fight globally. The Internet makes this possible. There are literally millions of teenagers who are members of Anonymous in some way. For these young people Internet is the most important element in their life. It is absolutely fundamental in terms of their music, education, relationships, and reconstructing their vision of society. This is not ideology; this is their life. With some reason, they fear that there is a major operation to control the Internet. Anonymous has been started to fight for the Internet commons. The enclosure of common lands was a precondition of the Industrial Revolution. Today there is a concerted project to enclose the commons of the Internet. Governments would love to get rid of the Internet commons; they want to make the Internet tame, cute, for educational purposes and corporate advertisements only. But how can you control the Internet? This is impossible. Overall there is panic and concern about the Internet among elite. But the genie's already out of the bottle.

Mukul Kumar: *In what ways did the movements of 2011, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, surprise you or challenge your earlier thinking about urban social movements?*

MC: Everything surprised me. No one expected these movements. The leaders of the world are crossing their fingers that the movements will fade away. It is an absolute nightmare for them. The one thing that did not surprise me is the capacity of constructing autonomy by mobilizing outside the institutional system because of the mobile communication network. I spent eight years writing a book called *Communication Power* (2009) that explored these questions within the context movements during the first decade of the twenty-first century in Korea, the Philippines, Ukraine, Spain, and Iran. So I was not surprised about the potential of the new communication technologies to foster autonomous

social movements and autonomous politics. But I was completely surprised by the vitality and scale of the movements. They emerged in a diversity of social and cultural contexts. I was certain that information technologies would amplify collective action. It is not the technology that creates movements; it enables movements and shapes the forms they have taken. Assemblies, deliberation, and occupation have always been central to social movements. What is distinctive about the current historical moment is the role of the Internet in organizing and amplifying these movements.

JW: The Tea Party is a curious phenomenon in that it embodies some of the aspects of recent social movements but also differs in other significant ways. How do you think about the Tea Party in theoretical and political terms?

MC: It's important to understand how the Tea Party has changed over time. The Tea Party emerged as a popular reaction at the grassroots level after the financial crisis and prior to Occupy. The Tea Party also emerged as a backlash of angry white men against the election of Obama. Though it has many characteristics of a social movement, I do not think the Tea Party is a social movement per se, because it does not aim to challenge the values of society. Initially the Tea Party did not have national leadership. Later conservative corporations poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the Tea Party. The Republican Party saw the opportunity to redirect the Tea Party's populist anger toward the new Democratic Party hegemony. This has created a coalition of corporate elites and populist mobilization. In the process, the Tea Party has confronted the same kinds of questions social movements face: How can we be effective in political institutions that we do not trust? This is a major dilemma. The Tea Party became a party and its social movement characteristics began to disappear. Now the Tea Party has enough voters to elect or remove Republicans in many districts. It is worth mentioning that right-wing and neofascist political parties have also had resurgence in Norway, France, Greece, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. In moments of crisis, movements to both advance and attack democracy emerge. We are living in such a moment.

MK: In contrast to most of the literature on social movements in the US, your work has focused on the urban characteristics of social movements. Could you talk about why the urban remains an important scale at which to understand the emerging movements?

MC: The current social movements are urban movements. Why? Because in many cases, they start with urban issues, including the critical example of the foreclosure crisis in the US. Critiques of models of urban growth have been at the forefront of the movements in Brazil and Turkey. These are not movements for trade union demands. They are urban

and environmental movements as much as anything else. They are also networked across cyberspace.

Urban social movements have always been important in history, as I show in my book *The City and the Grassroots* (1983). But they were largely ignored because they did not fit into the parameters of social theory. For the Marxist left, for example, the industrial working class is the privileged agent of social change. I always tell my students to first think for yourself. Do not start with literature reviews. Of course, you must find how you are positioned and what has been done in the social sciences that you can strengthen or challenge. But first be yourself. Otherwise we will be constantly reproducing social science paradigms that do not necessarily correspond to changing empirical realities. My own work on social movements draws upon Alan Touraine and Alberto Melucci. Our definition of social movement is quite clear. Social movements challenge the values and institutions of society outside of established institutional channels. That is why they are levers of social change. On the other hand, much of the mainstream literature in the US on social movements comes from the discipline of political science. These debates begin and end with political institutions. For them, social movements are interest groups that are outside the political system that have to be channeled into votes and new political power bases. When they do refer to social movements, it is in the paradigm of irrationality and deviant behavior. They begin with the traditional paradigm of political science, and they look at everything in society in those terms.

Elizabeth Mattiuzzi: *Could you elaborate on the similarities and differences of the new social movements?*

MC: I concentrated on the similarities of the movements: their origin, their horizontality and leaderless organizations, and their rhizomatic characteristics. In order to understand how and why these movements simultaneously exist and do not exist, appear and disappear, the notion of rhizome is crucial. I call these movements “rhizomatic” in the sense that they are always there in the Internet and then emerge in different forms in institutions, urban space, go underground, and so forth. Who, for example, could have predicted that Occupy Wall Street would become an important source of hurricane relief? The long-term vision of actors is also another similarity among the movements. There is recognition that changing people’s mind is a slow process. The Spanish movement slogan was: “We go slow because we go far.” The movements have support and empathy in general terms, but it takes time to change habits and minds. One example is the question of class conflict in the US. Although there has not been much public awareness of class conflict in the US, the Occupy Wall Street movement raised people’s awareness of inequality.

According to the Pew Institute, two-thirds of the American public now believes that inequality is the most important conflict in the US.

Christina Gossman: *What are the possibilities and limits of organizing through forums like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter?*

MC: This is a huge debate in movements. There is a tremendous debate about to what extent movements should use something like Facebook, but the movements go where the people are. The people are on Facebook. There was extraordinary technological innovation in the Occupy camps. There is a movement to revolutionize information technology to move beyond the corporate structures of the Internet. The corporate information technologies have not clamped down on social movements yet because they fear reduction in traffic. There is a lower barrier to entry in information technology and the Internet. With relatively small amounts of money, there is tremendous and constant innovation in these areas. There is a now a new generation of programmer activists.

JW: *Thank you so much for coming, Professor Castells.*

MC: It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

References

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