

The Urban Sociology of Manuel Castells: A Critical Examination of the Central Concepts

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Précis: The writings of Manuel Castells are centrally concerned with the development of a Marxist urban sociology. This article provides a critical examination of the central concepts of these writings. The article begins with some preparatory remarks on Castells's critique of conventional urban sociology and on the Althusserian variant of historical materialism which he adopts. This is followed by an examination of the four central concepts of Castells's work, namely, collective consumption, the urban system, urban planning and urban social movements. It will be argued throughout that, although Castells's writings may act as a catalyst in the future development of a Marxist urban sociology, the conceptual core of his work makes no substantial contribution *per se* towards this development.

I INTRODUCTION

The work of Manuel Castells purports to provide, in various ways, a Marxist/historical materialist analysis of cities. The aim of this article is to provide a critique of this work through an examination of Castells's four most central concepts, namely, collective consumption, the urban system, urban planning and urban social movements.

While acknowledging that Castells's work may have acted as a catalyst in stimulating a renewal of interest in both urban studies and historical materialism, I shall argue that his conceptual framework (particularly the framework outlined in "The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach" (1977a) is almost totally devoid of heuristic merit, not only according to the criteria of a historical materialist analysis, but according to the normal criteria of any rigorous and cogent analysis. In reaching this judgement I have been governed solely by a critical examination of the facts (the facts in this case

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being based upon a scrupulous exegesis of Castells's work). It is obvious that facts can often be problematic and open to dispute. Hence, any challenge to my critique must either challenge the facts (i.e., my exegesis of Castells's work) or my criteria of what constitutes a rigorous and cogent analysis.

My critique is that the theoretical core of Castells's work, contrary to his claims, tells us virtually nothing about either cities or historical materialism. This claim is significant because it challenges the exaggerated importance which (with some exceptions, notably, Glass (1977)) is usually attributed to Castells's work. For example, Pickvance (1978, p. 173) described "The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach" as "one of the most significant works in urban sociology ever written" while Feldman (1978, p. 137) welcomed its publication as "something of a major event" which represented "an important contribution to the rapidly growing Marxist literature on cities" (*ibid.*, p. 142). Harloe (1978, p. 2) in turn acknowledged the "value and importance of Castells's pioneering effort" while Roweis (1979, p. 579) described it as "vibrant and exciting" which could "lead to a viable urban science". As will be seen presently, a close scrutiny of the central concepts of Castells's work reveals that the value of the latter is, contrary to these exaggerated claims, extremely limited.

Before proceeding to a critical examination of Castells's concepts, I shall briefly outline, first, Castells's critique of urban sociology and, second, the Althusserian formulation of historical materialism which he adopts. These preparatory remarks serve to place Castells's work as accurately as possible in its context. In undertaking this review of the conceptual core of Castells's work, I have (inevitably) been forced to make certain compromises over detail without, I hope, making any concessions to inaccuracy.

II CASTELLS'S CRITIQUE OF URBAN SOCIOLOGY

Castells's critique of urban sociology, in essence, is that it is wrong to consider the city (or the "urban", or urban agglomerations, as the terms are interchangeably used) as an independent and autonomous entity. He argues that the city should, more correctly, be analysed as dependent upon and determined by the society (or "social formation") within which it is located.¹

Castells (1976b, p. 65) cogently demonstrates his critique through an examination of, *inter alia*, the two themes of urbanism and urbanisation which he argues, "provide the essential theoretical basis of urban sociology"

1. It may be noted that in summarising Castells's critique of urban sociology, I have extracted (or, rather, extricated) it from the epistemological embroidery in which it is normally wrapped (see Castells 1976a, 1976b, 1976d, 1977b). I have treated such embroidery as exegetically redundant to Castells's critique and have elsewhere (McKeown 1980a) provided a critical examination of his epistemology.

Both of these themes are said to illustrate, in different ways, the same ecological assumptions which, for analytical purposes, treat the city in isolation from its ambient social structure. In the case of urbanism (as formulated, for example, by Wirth (1938), the city is treated as the independent cause, or determinant, of urban culture. Castells (1976a, p. 38) argues, by contrast, that the urban culture described by Wirth could be better (or even best) explained by reference to the social structure (in the Marxist/historical materialist sense) within which it was located. In the case of urbanisation, the assumptions of ecology have resulted in the process and pattern of urban growth and development (as evidenced both in the work of Burgess (1925) and in the comparative studies of urbanisation and "over-urbanisation") being regarded as, simultaneously, uniform, universal and unilinear. Castells (1977a, Part I) criticises these assumptions, arguing that urbanisation could be better (or even best) understood by locating it within its historically determined social structure.

III THE ALTHUSSERIAN FORMULATION OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Castells's analysis (which he proposes as an alternative to conventional urban sociology) begins from Althusser's, rather than Marx's formulation of historical materialism (although the difference between the two is merely one of emphasis rather than substance). For Marx (1976), the essence of historical materialism is that any society can be analysed in terms of its mode of production, the latter in turn being analysed in terms of its base and its superstructure. Thus, for Marx, to explain any society involves first, an explanation of the laws and exigencies of the economic base, and second, an explanation of the way in which these laws and exigencies determine the superstructure. Hence the importance for Marx of a rigorous economic analysis as a theoretical and methodological prerequisite of any historical materialist analysis.

The Althusserian formulation only slightly alters this conception of a mode of production by characterising the latter, not in terms of a base and a superstructure, but in terms of three basic elements: the economic, the political and the ideological. Each of these elements form separate systems which (in contrast to Marx's characterisation of the base determining the superstructure) are said to have "relative autonomy" from each other, although the economic system is determinant "in the last instance". In other words, the economic system is regarded as the major, rather than the only, determinant of the political and ideological superstructure. Each of the elements of the mode of production is said to form a structure, although (as

far as the capitalist mode of production is concerned) only the economic structure, following Marx's pioneering analysis, has yet been analysed.

The significance of the Althusserian formulation of historical materialism is that it clarifies what might be involved if a historical materialist analysis of (for example) capitalist society were actually developed. It indicates that while historical materialism does not necessarily entail a total economic determinism, it does, nevertheless, attribute priority to the analysis of the economic system and of the way in which it determines, "in the last instance", the political and ideological systems. Similarly, it suggests that the political and ideological systems may also be analysed structurally along similar lines to Marx's analysis of the economic system.² Thus Althusser's formulation of historical materialism is essentially a clarification of the latter's programme of research, without actually contributing to the development of this programme.

One final preparatory remark: as regards the programme of research entailed by the basic propositions of historical materialism, it is important to note that this programme of research remains in a very under-developed and problematic state. This is evidenced, at the economic level, by the limited extent of Marx's economic analysis of capitalism and also by the fact that many of the assumptions underlying his analysis (stemming notably, but not exclusively, from the labour theory of value) have been shown to be excessively and (in the case of the labour theory of value) unavoidably restrictive. (However, the physical quantity approach as formulated by Steedman (1977) seems to provide a clear alternative framework for pursuing Marx's analytical project which avoids some of the outstanding defects of Marx's economic analysis.) The underdeveloped and problematic nature of the Marxian research programme is also evidenced by the lack of any rigorous analysis of the political structure. This is exemplified, *inter alia*, by the work of Poulantzas, (1972 and 1973), whose analysis can be easily shown (even in its own terms) to be highly implausible.³

These preparatory remarks provide the general background for both

2. It is perhaps ironic that the Althusserian school should so consistently and vehemently claim that their position is not structuralist (Althusser, 1970, p. 7; Poulantzas, 1973, p. 26; Castells's 1976e, pp. 128-131; Balibar, 1970, p. 226) despite the centrality of the concept of structure in their work. It is apparent that their position is structuralist according to a minimal (and conventional) definition of this term, as a method of analysis in terms of a set of elements and a set of relations between these elements which, together, form a structure.

3. The full demonstration of this point is beyond the purview of the present article, though the Poulantzas-Miliband debate does illustrate (if not demonstrate) the point in question. In this debate Poulantzas insists on the importance of "objective structures" (Poulantzas 1972, p. 242) (although one looks in vain to find the objective structures which his work is said to elucidate) while Miliband accuses Poulantzas of "structural super-determinism" and "structuralist abstractionism" (Miliband, 1973, p. 85) (without seeming to perceive that Poulantzas never actually analyses structures). This debate would seem to be indicative of the lack of a rigorous Marxist analysis of the structure of the political system of capitalism.

understanding and assessing the heuristic merits of the conceptual core of Castells's work. I now turn to a critical examination of the four main concepts which, more or less, comprise this conceptual core, namely, collective consumption, the urban system, urban planning and urban social movements.

IV COLLECTIVE CONSUMPTION

IV.1 Urban Agglomerations as Units of Collective Consumption

Castells begins his historical materialist analysis of urban agglomerations by defining the latter as units of collective consumption. By collective consumption Castells means and refers to such facilities as schools, hospitals, transport, housing, leisure, etc., which are said, in some sense or other, to be "collective". Castells (1977a, p. 445) claims that the phenomenon of collective consumption designates "most of the realities connoted by the term urban". His argument is based on the assertion that urban agglomerations are essentially units or centres for the reproduction of labour power and that, of the two elements comprising the latter, i.e., individual consumption and collective consumption, it is collective consumption which is predominant: hence his argument that urban agglomerations are units of collective consumption.

There are, at least, two independent reasons why Castells's definition of urban agglomerations as units of collective consumption is untenable. The first concerns the lack of justification for isolating the reproduction of labour power as the defining characteristic of urban agglomerations and the second reason concerns the lack of justification for further isolating the "collective" aspects of the reproduction of labour power as the defining characteristic of urban agglomerations. Both of these objections will now be examined, respectively.

Castells's proposal to define urban agglomerations as centres for the reproduction of labour power faces the objections that urban agglomerations are also units of production and that the reproduction of labour power is only one aspect of production. Since in reality production and reproduction are inseparable and since analytically, from the perspective of historical materialism, both can only be understood in relation to each other, then it would seem to follow that urban agglomerations should be defined as centres of both production and reproduction. Castells (1976c, p. 148) obliquely acknowledges this possible objection, but tautologically rejects it with the assertion that urban agglomerations "cannot be defined" in this way since "in the last analysis the 'city' is a residential unit of labour power."

The second objection to Castells's definition of urban agglomerations

concerns his claim that since the reproduction of labour is predominantly "collective", then urban agglomerations should be defined as units of collective consumption. The objection to this claim is twofold: first, it is ambiguous and second, it is dubious. It is ambiguous because it is not clear whether the term "collective" consumption, as used by Castells, refers to the collective mode of provision or the collective mode of consumption. (It may be noted, parenthetically, that this ambiguity could have been avoided, to some extent, by the use of either a typology or a continuum of consumption.) A simple typology of consumption could be constructed, for example, using as two coordinates: mode of provision and mode of consumption, in such a way that all consumption items could be classified into one of four possible categories, as in the following diagram:

		Mode of Provision	
		Collective	Individual
Mode of Consumption	(1) Collective	e.g., roads, parks	e.g., philanthropic provision of health, education etc.
	(2) Individual	e.g., state housing	e.g., private housing

An alternative clarification of the concept of consumption could be obtained by treating all consumption as part of a continuum varying from goods which are wholly collective to goods which are wholly individual (see Harloe, 1977, p. 22).

The second (and more serious) aspect of the objection is that it is extremely dubious. This is because, if the term "collective consumption" is understood in the sense of collective provision (a plausible assumption)⁴ then the limited available statistical evidence suggests that collective consumption represents a relatively small proportion of total consumption, and hence, of the reproduction of labour power. The statistical evidence refers to Great Britain and is based on data from the 1970 Family Expenditure sample survey. This data suggests that the per cent of income (and hence consumption) provided "collectively" by the state in the form of direct and indirect benefits (which includes, *inter alia*, cash payments, tax concessions,

4. This is a plausible assumption for two reasons. First, because on exegetical grounds, Castells frequently uses the term collective consumption synonymously with the state provision of what he terms "the indirect salary" (Castells 1975a, p. 175; see also 1976b, p. 81; 1977b, p. 64; 1977a, pp. 451 and 460). Second because, in terms of the framework of historical materialism, which Castells explicitly adopts, the significant point about collective consumption is that it is part of the real wage which is provided by the state rather than by the individual capitalist.

as well as an estimated value of health, education and welfare services) is only 21 per cent of average household income. (See Westergaard, J. and H. Resler, 1975, p. 65, Table 5). The similarity between Britain and other OECD countries with respect to public expenditure suggests that the size of "collective consumption" in all of these countries may be of a similar magnitude. (See OECD 1978 pp. 12 ff). The significance of this fact in the present context is that, even if there were no objections to defining urban agglomerations as units for the reproduction of labour power, Castells's definition in terms of collective consumption would still be objectionable.

The more general point is that, in terms of the analytical purposes of historical materialism, Castells's definition of the "urban" is severely deficient because it attempts to limit the "urban" to the range of problems associated with one (relatively small) fraction of variable capital (i.e., collective consumption). To define the "urban" from the perspective of historical materialism, as Castells actually proposes, requires (at least) that every element or aspect of the capitalist economic system be open for analysis (i.e., constant capital, variable capital and surplus value and their quantitative and qualitative interrelations). This is no more than the minimum analytical requirement of any approach claiming to be historical materialist. While the study of the problems of collective consumption from the point of view of historical materialism is one possible domain of inquiry (of particular preference to Castells), it cannot be regarded, as a matter of consistency within this perspective, as exclusively "the process that structures space" (1977a, p. 237). In terms of historical materialism, collective consumption is only one of the processes that structure and determine space, whether this space be "urban" or otherwise.

IV.2 *The Causes and Consequences of Collective Consumption within Capitalism*

Having selected collective consumption as his preferred domain of inquiry, Castells (1977a, pp. 457-458) puts forward five different reasons to explain the "strategic role" and "decisive place" (Castells 1977a, respectively, pp. 457 and 458) of collective consumption within capitalist society. None of these reasons are elaborated at any length and no empirical evidence is offered in their support. The five reasons put forward are:

(i) The growth of collective consumption is part of the overall growth of consumption in capitalist society. The reason for this, Castells (1977b, p. 63) affirms, is that "the economy of advanced capitalist societies rests more and more on the process of consumption i.e., the key problems are located at the level of the realisation of surplus value or, if one prefers, on the extension of the market". Given that this is (assumed, though not proven, to be) the case, Castells (1978, pp. 39-40) claims that collective consumption plays an essen-

tial role in the "stimulation of consumption" since it is essential for the growth of individual commodity consumption.

(ii) The growing concentration (both spatial and social) of capital, which is characteristic of advanced monopoly capitalism, has also given rise to the growing spatial concentration of labour power. The reproduction of the latter is said to have created, in turn, problems of such a "size and nature" (1976b, p. 75) that they can only be solved by state intervention, in the form of collective consumption (1977b, p. 63 and 1978, pp. 38-9).

(iii) The growth of collective consumption has also been due, it is affirmed, (1975a, p. 176 and 1978, pp. 17 and 41) to "the growing power of the worker movement which extends its bargaining power to all areas of social life". The argument here is that the working class have secured increases in the real wage through "changes in the historical definition of 'need' both qualitatively and quantitatively" (*ibid*) and part of this increased real wage is now provided (through a tax on wages and profits) by the state in the form of collective consumption.

(iv) Collective consumption has also emerged Castells argues (1978, p. 20) because capital (particularly multinational capital) has managed to "shift the responsibility for infrastructures on to different local or national authorities". Since the latter are increasingly dependent on multinationals for investment and employment, nation-states are increasingly required to finance collective consumption.

(v) The final (and major) reason for the emergence of collective consumption, according to Castells, is that it is a response to the (alleged) law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. He writes (1977, p. 461): "Above all, this production of collective consumption (with a very weak or non-existent profit rate) plays a fundamental role in the struggle of capital against the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Indeed by devaluing part of social capital by unprofitable investments, the state helps to raise proportionately the rate of profit to social capital as a whole" (See also, Castells, 1978, p. 19; for a comprehensive critique of this argument, see McKeown, 1980b).

Each of these five reasons (whether singularly or in combination) is a possible explanation of the role of collective consumption within capitalism. However, it is far from clear which is the actual explanation since no empirical evidence is offered for any one and hence for preferring one to the other. Without such empirical evidence it is impossible to establish what, in fact, are the precise causes and consequences of collective consumption in capitalist society. Castells's work, while being suggestive, provides no answer to this question.

V THE URBAN SYSTEM

The second major concept in Castells's work is the urban system. This concept derives from his attempt to apply the basic categories of the Althusserian formulation of historical materialism to the analysis of urban agglomerations. Castells (1976b, p. 78) begins from the (uncontentious) assumption that the social structure is (somehow) reflected and expressed in space, and hence in urban agglomerations. Thus urban agglomerations are said to represent a particular "specification" of the social structure.

Since the social structure is analysable in terms of its mode of production, and since the latter in turn comprises three elements, namely, the economic, the political and the ideological, it follows that urban agglomerations also comprise these same three elements. This co-existence of the elements of the social structure in urban agglomerations is referred to by Castells as the "urban system". Thus for Castells, a historical materialist analysis of an urban agglomeration amounts to an analysis of its urban system.

Castells proceeds to an analysis of the urban system, not according to the theoretical assumptions of historical materialism (which requires first and foremost an analysis of the economic base), but through the elaboration of a vast taxonomy. He (1976c, p. 153) argues that the characterisation of the urban system in terms of the three basic elements (i.e., the economic, the political and the ideological) is "far too general and requires a whole series of specifications in order to be of use in concrete research".

Castells begins his detailed "specification" of the elements (economic, political and ideological) of the urban system by providing a "specification" of the economic element. He (1977a, p. 237) argues that this element is expressed in urban agglomerations by "the two fundamental elements of the economic system" and by "the element that derives from them". These two "fundamental elements" are Production (P) (i.e., the set of activities producing goods, services and information such as industry and offices) and Consumption (C) (i.e., the set of activities concerning the social appropriation of the product; such as housing, collective facilities, etc.). These are, according to Castells, the first two elements of the "urban system". The third element of the "urban system", Exchange, (E), is said to be derived from P and C because it refers to the exchanges between and within P and C (such as transport and commerce).

The next element of the urban system is Administration (A) which is said to be "the urban specification of the Political instance" (1977a, p. 238). This element refers to the regulation and control of the relations between P, C and E (e.g., local government, urban planning agencies, etc.). The final element of the urban system, according to Castells (1977a, p. 238), is the Symbolic (S) which "expresses the specification of the ideological at the level of the spatial forms". In summary then, Castells's "urban system"

contains five elements: Production (P), Consumption (C), Exchange (E), Administration (A)⁵ and Symbolic (S)⁶.

Castells then argues that this specification of the elements of the social structure (i.e., the economic, political and ideological) from which are derived the elements of the urban system (i.e., P, C, E, A and S) requires a further specification. This is because the elements of the urban system are "much too general to be translated into explanatory propositions" (1976c, p. 157). He (1977a, p. 238) thus proposes that the elements of the urban system be "broken down into sub-elements". Each of these sub-elements are, according to Castells (1977a, p. 238), "defined by the refraction on it of other elements (including itself) and/or other instances of the social structure". According to this obscure definitional "principle" (ibid), Castells breaks the elements of the urban system into the following sub-elements:

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Sub-Elements</i>		<i>Example</i>
Production	Instruments of work	P1	Factories
	Objects of work	P2	Raw materials
		P3	Industrial environment
		P4	Administration information
Consumption	Simple reproduction of labour power	C1	Housing and minimal material amenities (drains, lighting, roads, etc.)
		C2	Green spaces, pollution, noise, etc, (environment)
	Extended reproduction of labour power	C3	school amenities
		C4	socio-cultural amenities
Exchange	Production-consumption	E1	Commerce and distribution
	Consumption-production	E2	Commutings (urban transport)
	Production-production	E3	Goods transport

5. This is translated more literally though, perhaps, less appropriately by Pickvance (in Castells, 1976c, p. 159) as "Management", from the French word *Gestion*.

6. In his original characterisation of the urban system (Castells, 1976b, p. 79 and 1976c, p. 154), Castells refers only to four elements (P, C, E, A). The element "S" is only included in a later publication (Castells, 1977a, p. 238).

	Consumption-consumption	E4	Circulation (residential mobility)
	Consumption-ideological	E5	Emission of information, shows, etc.
	Production-ideological	E6	Historic buildings
	Consumption-political	E7	Decision-making centres
	Production-political	E8	Business centres
Administration	Global/local Specific/general		
Symbolic	Failure to recognise/ recognition/ communication. Effect of legitimation.		

(Castells, 1977a, pp. 238-240)

These elements and sub-elements of the urban system must in turn, according to Castells (1977a, p. 240), be further "broken down in order to facilitate the 'analysis' of 'concrete situations' ". He (1977a, p. 240) argues, each sub-element must be further "differentiated by specifying, within each sub-element, levels and roles". Castells gives two examples (C1 and P3) to illustrate how the sub-elements of the urban system may be further "differentiated" with respect to "levels and roles".

Sub-element

C₁ (Housing)

Levels: Luxury Housing
social housing (+, -)
slums, etc.

Roles: Lodger
tenant
co-owner
owner

P₃ (Industrial Zone)

Levels: Well equipped
badly equipped

Roles: Articulation of industry with the natural environment (water, space), communications, (network of transportation), social milieu, technology (industrial interdependencies)
(Castells, 1977a, pp. 240-241).

There are (at least) two questions which arise concerning Castells's concept of the urban system. The first concerns its relationship to the concept of collective consumption and the second concerns its relevance to the development of a historical materialist analysis of urban agglomerations. As regards the first question, it is apparent that the urban system includes collective consumption as a sub-element. Thus, to the extent that both represent different definitions to the term "urban" they are transparently inconsistent. In the interests of consistency (if not exegetical accuracy) collective consumption is best regarded as a sub-element of the urban system.

As to the second (and more important) question, the relevance of the concept of the urban system to the development of a historical materialist analysis of urban agglomerations seems to be very doubtful since the concept of the urban system lacks any explanation of how the various elements and sub-elements of this urban system are interrelated and determined. This is evident, for example, from his classification (above) of such phenomena as raw materials, green spaces and historic buildings as, respectively, P_2 , C_2 , and E_6 which cannot, in the normal usage of words, be regarded as either a useful description or explanation of these phenomena.

Thus the concept of the urban system is no more than a taxonomy. It could, however, be developed into an explanatory scheme by, *inter alia*, postulating certain verifiable relations between its elements and sub-elements, on the basis of clearly specified assumptions. However, Castells does not develop the urban system in this way; he assumes rather (and wrongly) that this taxonomy provides an explanation of how the urban system functions and operates.

Castells's concern is with the "political" question of how the social structure or urban system is maintained or could be transformed. For Castells, the maintenance or transformation of the social structure is essentially a political matter, since the political system is defined as that which regulates and maintains the laws of the social structure. Thus, for Castells, a historical materialist analysis of the urban system is essentially an analysis of "urban politics". The study of urban politics in turn is subdivided into two areas, namely,

urban planning and urban social movements which correspond, respectively, to the maintenance of the urban system and the transformation of the urban system. So, for Castells, a historical materialist analysis of urban agglomerations is essentially an analysis of urban planning and urban social movements. Both of these will now be examined respectively where it will be seen that both suffer from the same pervasive assumption that the laws and operations of the capitalist social structure (and hence of the capitalist urban system) have already been unproblematically established. As a result, it is assumed that the problems to which urban planning and urban social movements respond can be unproblematically explained by reference to the independent variable of capitalism without any explanation of the intervening causal mechanism involved. One is ironically reminded in this context of Marx's (1974, pp. 19 and 30) prefatory and cautionary remarks in the first volume of "Capital" where he insists that "there is no royal road to science" and that it is only through scrupulous attention to minutiae and detail that one can hope to reach "its luminous summits".

VI URBAN PLANNING

Castells regards "all planning" as a political device for regulating the problems which adversely affect the normal and smooth functioning of the social structure or urban system. It is a response to what he variously terms "a contradiction" (1977a, p. 260), a "dislocation" (*ibid*), a "displacement" (1969, p. 426) and an "irregularity" (1977a, p. 427) in the social structure or urban system. The purpose of this intervention is to "regulate" (1977a, p. 269), to "counter-balance" (1977a, p. 425) and to "go beyond" (1977a, p. 427) the problems of the social structure or urban system.

There are two noteworthy features of Castells's "theoretical" analysis of urban planning. The first concerns his attempt to develop a typology or taxonomy of "urban actors" and the second concerns his attempt to explain the nature of the problems which simultaneously generate the necessity for urban planning and at the same time constrain the effectiveness of such planning. I shall now examine both of these aspects.

VI.1 *The Typology of Urban Actors*

Urban planning, according to Castells (1969, p. 423), occurs within the urban system through the activities of "urban actors".⁸ These actors are

7. This is to be distinguished from his empirical research on urban planning in Paris (Castells 1972; 1973; 1977a, pp. 304-332; 1978, pp. 93-108) and in Dunkirk (Castells 1974; 1977b, pp. 66 ff; 1978, Ch. 4) which (in some respects) is highly informative although (and perhaps because) it fails to systematically apply this "theoretical" analysis.

8. In the Althusserian framework, an "actor" is not a "subject" (in the Weberian sense) (see Poulantzas, 1973, p. 62) but is a "support-agent" (Castells, 1976b, p. 78) of structures. This conception raises the (unresolved) problem in this framework of how to explain social change since Althusserian actors are, by definition, precluded from reacting against structures in order to change them.

defined in relation to "the different elements and sub-elements of the urban system" (*ibid.*). In addition to the basic elements of the urban system already mentioned (i.e., P, C, E, A and S), Castells adds four other "sub-elements", namely, Authority (A), Organisation (O), Local (L) and Global (G), without, however, providing any definition of these "sub-elements" or justification for their selection. Castells (1969, p. 424) proceeds to construct the following typology of urban actors:

Theoretical Structural Combination	Example of a "Concrete" Actor
O-G-P	Large international firms
O-G-C	Trade unions
O-L-P	Chambers of commerce and industry
O-L-C	Neighbourhood associations
A-G-P	Organs of planning
A-G-C	
A-L-P	Committees of concerted action or regional expansion
A-L-C	Municipal institutions

(O = organisation; G = global; P = centred on production; C = centred on consumption; L = local; A = authority.)

Castells does not explore further the possible heuristic merits of these "theoretical structural combinations", stating that they are only "illustrations" (1969, p. 442, footnote 39), though precisely what they illustrate is left unclear. Indeed, in its existing form, Castells's taxonomy of "urban actors" is without any explanatory value. His classification of, for example, trade unions, neighbourhood associations and municipal institutions, as respectively, O-G-C, O-L-C, and A-L-C is hardly an informative nomenclature.⁹

VI.2 *The Causes of and Constraints upon Urban Planning*

The second feature of Castells's treatment of urban planning concerns, not questions of taxonomy, but the potentially more substantial issue of the genesis of urban planning and the constraints which govern its operation and effectiveness. Most of the problems to which planning responds are, "in

9. In a footnote to his elaboration of the concept of "urban actors" Castells claims to reject "the formalism of universal taxonomies" (Castells, 1969, p. 442, footnote 43) and emphasises the need for "theoretically relevant variables" (*ibid.*). Such inconsistency between Castells's claims and achievements suggests the contemporary relevance of Locke's observation that "vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for mysteries of science; and hard and misapplied words, with little or no meaning, have by prescription, such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either of those who speak or those who hear them that they are but the covers of ignorance, and hindrance to true knowledge," (Locke, J., 1964, p. 58).

general" (1969, p. 422), economic problems.¹⁰ This follows from the basic historical materialist position that it is the economic system which is both dominant and determinant in the capitalist mode of production. Consequently, it is argued, the problems or contradictions generated by, and endemic in, the economic system present the greatest threat to the stability and continuity of the whole capitalist mode of production. Thus the problem of the genesis of urban planning becomes for Castells a problem of analysing the nature of the problems and contradictions of the capitalist economic system.

Castells's economic analysis amounts to the elementary assertion that the capitalist economic system is composed of three elements which are combined by two relations. These three elements are, following Althusser, labour, means of production and non-labour (or capitalists), which are combined by the relations of property (or ownership) and real appropriation. In the capitalist mode of production the relations of property and real appropriation are said to be such that the capitalist owns labour power and means of production (relation of property) and also controls the production process by which these two elements are combined (relation of real appropriation).

On the basis of this characterisation of the capitalist economy, Castells (1976c, p. 152) claims, without any further argument or evidence, that the capitalist relations of production generate the following list of urban and regional problems: regional imbalance and excessive industrial and urban concentration; housing crises; obsolescence of industrial plant and infrastructure; mistakes in planning areas; and lack of skilled labour available locally. Castells (1976c, p. 152) claims, without any explanation of the causal mechanisms involved (or indeed any other form of explanation), that these problems are "manifestations" of the contradictions generated by the capitalist relations of property and real appropriation.

In addition to generating these problems, the capitalist relations of production are also said to be the main obstacle to their effective solution. Castells claims, again without any analytical or statistical justification, that these problems cannot be solved within the "structural limits" of the capitalist mode of production since their solution would involve and necessitate an alteration of the quintessentially capitalist relations of property and real appropriation. Thus, he claims (1969, p. 422), urban planning can only operate within "the structural limits of the concrete society, that is to say, by respecting the essential relations of the capitalist mode of production while at the same time effecting the necessary alterations to inessential relations in order to secure its 'smooth running'".

10. Planning interventions may also arise, it is said, from contradictions in the other instances of the social structure (i.e., political and ideological). However, Castells only briefly refers to the latter (Castells, 1969, p. 426; and 1976c, p. 152-3), his main concern being with planning as a response to economic problems or contradictions.

The significant feature of Castells's characterisation of the problems generating and constraining urban (and regional) planning is that it is based wholly on unsubstantiated claims and assertions. As such, it assumes as proven precisely that which it claims to prove. Moreover, in those cases where he does attempt to demonstrate the nature of urban and regional problems, his explanation is, in general, wholly untenable. His explanation (1976c, p. 152), for example, of what he terms "regional imbalance and excessive industrial/urban concentration" is particularly revealing in this respect. His explanation (*ibid.*) of this problem is that "each individual firm profits by pushing towards greater concentration whereas organised decentralisation would bring the greatest overall technical advantages"

There are two basic problems with this explanation. The first is that the profitability of different types of firm will be differently affected by different types of location. Thus, for purposes of clarity alone, Castells's assertion requires, first, a specification of the type of firm being considered (in terms of its size, product, market, etc.) and second, a specification of the type of location appropriate to that firm. From such a specification it may well become apparent that "each individual firm" does not necessarily "profit by pushing towards greater concentration".¹¹

The second problem is that the concept of "overall technical advantages", as used in connection with urban/industrial agglomerations, requires (at least) some clarification and quantification in respect of the size of the agglomeration in question, the level and efficiency of its infrastructural facilities, the type of industrial activities operating, etc., before any claims about maximum and minimum "technical advantages" can be properly made.¹² Thus, taking into consideration such problems, it remains an open question whether in fact "organised decentralisation" would necessarily "bring the greatest overall technical advantages".

This brief examination of Castells's analysis of urban planning reveals, first his penchant for elaborate taxonomies which are devoid of explanatory potential and, second, the lack of rigorous or convincing analysis. It is deficient, therefore, not only as an historical materialist analysis (which requires, as a theoretical and methodological priority, a rigorous analysis of the economic system), but as an analysis *tout court*.

VII URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Castells's analysis of urban social movements is concerned essentially with

11. Castells's failure to recognise this point is particularly surprising since his first published research was on precisely the topic of the variability of location patterns among different types of firm (Castells, 1969). This research in fact (and ironically) confirms and clarifies the elementary criticism being made here.

12. For a discussion of the complex question of the "economic optimum size" and "minimum efficient size" of urban/industrial agglomerations, see Hoover, 1971, p. 264.

investigating the way in which the social structure (or urban system) is (or could be) transformed. The analysis of urban social movements represents the second aspect of Castells's more general concern with "urban politics", the first aspect being urban planning. Both aspects reveal Castells's concern with the way in which the social structure (or urban system) is maintained (i.e., by urban planning) or transformed (i.e., by urban social movements).

The essence of Castells's approach to the study of urban social movements is contained in his article entitled "Theoretical Propositions for an Experimental Study of Urban Social Movements" (1976c).¹³ These propositions involve, first, a definition of urban social movements and, second, an outline of certain methodological rules and hypotheses for their study. These two aspects of his analysis will now be critically examined.

VII.1 *Castells's Definition of an Urban Social Movement*

There are, according to Castells, two criteria which distinguish an urban social movement. The first is that an urban social movement must have the effect of producing a "structural transformation" in the social structure (or urban system) and, secondly, that it can only produce this effect if it is related to other practices or movements. Castells (1976c, p. 151) regards urban social movements as different from other movements in that they produce "a qualitatively new effect on the social structure". This "qualitatively new effect" involves radical changes in either the capitalist relations of property and real appropriation, or in the system of authority (1976c, p. 151). For this reason he regards them as the "true source of change and innovation in the city" (1975b, p. 14). In other words, the first defining characteristic of an urban social movement, in Castells's sense, is that it must be the cause of radical change, which in turn he regards as synonymous with "true" change.

The second defining characteristic of urban social movements is that they must be related to and fused with other practices or movements. Thus, according to Castells (1977a, p. 453), "there is no qualitative transformation of urban structure that is not produced by an articulation of the urban movements with other movements, in particular (in our societies) with the working-class movement and with the political class struggle". In other words, if a movement is concerned solely with "urban" issues (e.g., collective consumption), it can, according to Castells (1976c, p. 170), "at most be an instrument of reform". Castells thus uses the term urban social movement in a specific sense to refer to the fusion of different movements or practices which together have the effect of radically altering the capitalist relations of

13. Castells erroneously assumes that the study of urban social movements can be made "experimental" by assuming "as constant all elements not included in a particular analysis" (Castells, 1976c, p. 172). "To ignore a factor is not to control it" as Schnore once pointed out. (Schnore, 1965, p. 388).

production or the system of power, and being thereby a "true source of change and innovation in the city" (1975b, p. 14).

The most significant feature of Castells's definition of urban social movements is the strictness of its focus. This is because Castells's definition of an urban social movement stipulates that the latter must first have the effect of producing a radical change in either the relations of production or in the system of power and, secondly, that this effect can only be the result of its fusion with other "mass movements" (1977a, p. 453). The difficulty with defining an urban social movement in this way and then characterising it as the only "true source of change and innovation" is that such forms of change (at least in advanced capitalist countries) tend to be relatively rare and exceptional. This raises two further problems.

The first is that, from the point of view of research, the actual paucity and rarity of urban social movements considerably limits the possibility of actually analysing them. This problem is evidenced by Castells's (1977a, Ch. 14) own researches in Paris, Quebec and Chile where, despite the existence of various protest movements, he failed to actually identify (and hence analyse) an urban social movement.

The second problem is that if urban social movements are considered to be the only form and source of "true" change, this, by definition, excludes, first, other forms of change which may be less radical, though still very significant for those involved, and, secondly, it excludes the possibility that important "structural" changes may arise that are not, strictly speaking, the effect of an urban social movement or indeed any other form of protest movement (e.g., the welfare state in Britain or the nationalisation of certain industries).¹⁴

These considerations suggest that urban social movements are but one possible source of one type of change. In other words, the social structure (or urban system) can be changed in a variety of ways and by a variety of means (urban social movements being only one of these means). This indicates, above all, the limited domain of inquiry implied by Castells's definition of urban social movements, and perhaps why, in actual research, urban social movements have come to be synonymous, not with Castells's narrow definition, but with protest movements generally (see Pickvance, 1975, p. 31).

VII.2 *Methodological Rules and Hypotheses for the Study of Urban Social Movements*

In elaborating his "theoretical propositions" for the study of urban social

14. Pickvance makes a similar point, arguing, more concretely, that "governmental institutions cannot be dismissed as sources of minor changes, and to this extent must be treated as sources of urban effects in the same way as social movements. In other words, the role of authorities in initiating change is an empirical question requiring analysis of policy-formation within governmental institutions" (Pickvance, 1975, p. 34).

movements, Castells's (1976c, p. 162) basic methodological point of departure is that urban social movements "have no significance in themselves" because their only significance is that of "the structural elements which they combine". In other words, the method for studying urban social movements, according to Castells (1976c, p. 163), is to analyse each "concrete case" in terms of a particular interpretative scheme or "predefined framework" which is composed, in this case, of "certain structural elements and laws". The problem of the subjective meaning of the urban social movement to the "actors" or participants involved is treated axiomatically as irrelevant by Castells, with the gnomic assertion that "meaning only has meaning outside itself" (1976c, p. 163). In other words, the "only" meaning which urban social movements have (at least within this perspective) is that conferred upon them by structuralist categories.¹⁵

The structuralist categories by which Castells proposes to study urban social movements have already been examined. These categories include the three basic elements of the social structure (namely, the economic, the political and the ideological) as well as the elements, sub-elements, levels and roles which together form the urban system and the urban actors. Thus Castells's structuralist categories amount to a vast taxonomic system which, he claims, can be used for "concrete analysis", and which, he also claims (1976c, p. 171), "at the same time will amount to the demonstration of a law in so far as the situation realises this law by being made intelligible through the interrelating of the real elements subjected to our theoretical coding."

It is noteworthy that Castells never actually provides a clear and precise account of these laws, which, it is claimed, would be revealed by concrete research. His notion of analysis seems to involve the uncritical application and elaboration of "Marxian" concepts rather than subjecting the latter to a critical scrutiny and testing. It is for this reason that his analysis is so devoid of heuristic merit or value.

Castells's methodological rules (of which there are basically three) for the study of urban social movements clearly reveal the exclusively taxonomic character of his analysis. The first methodological rule in any substantive analysis of urban social movements is, he claims (1976c, p. 171) to identify the "problems", "stakes" or "issues" involved. These problems must, he argues, be identified and "coded" in "structural terms". This means effec-

15. Pickvance (1975, p. 32), in this context, claims (following Weber) that: "the understanding of the subjective meaning of action to the actors . . . enables it to be correctly characterised as a particular type of action". This statement seems to involve two confusions. First, within the Weberian/interpretivist perspective, there can be no "correct" characterisation of subjective meaning. The only criteria for judging any characterisation of subjective meaning, according to Weber, is "adequacy" (Weber 1947, p. 99). The second confusion is that the Marxist/structuralist approach is largely (and axiomatically) unconcerned with subjective meaning since it always treats the latter in terms of a predefined theoretical framework where it is characterised as "true" or "false" consciousness.

tively that if the particular issue of an urban social movement concerns, for example, a claim for better housing, then this will be classified "structurally" as C_1 . This first methodological rule is cryptically crystallised in Castells's (1976c, p. 163) advice to "Give it a name".

The second and related rule is to classify the "social groups" who have mobilised around this particular issue to form the urban social movement. Such participants are "structurally" classified according to the typology of "urban actors".

The third basic rule is to analyse the organisation through which the urban social movement is expressed. The role of organisations, according to Castells (1976c, pp. 169-170) is to fuse or "link" together the various "structural elements" which constitute an urban social movement.¹⁶ "In the absence of an organisation" he claims (*ibid.*, p. 169) "urban contradictions are expressed either in a refracted form through other practices, or in 'wild' form as pure contradictions lacking any structural horizon".

Castells insists that "organisations" are methodologically secondary in the analysis of urban social movements. He states (1976c, p. 171) (with the implicit purpose of differentiating his approach from what Pickvance (1976, p. 178) terms "the Anglo-Saxon tradition of 'participation studies'") that the usual starting point for the study of urban social movements, to wit, "organisations" is the "wrong one". This is because "the genesis of an organisation does not form part of the analysis of social movements, for only its effects are important" (*ibid.*, pp. 169-170). The correct approach, he argues (*ibid.*, p. 171), "must start by identifying the contradictions ('problems') or drawing attention to mobilizations specific to those problems".

These are the three basic methodological rules by which Castells proposes to analyse urban social movements. Each illustrates, as has been suggested, the basically taxonomic character of his analysis. This is because Castells does not critically analyse the categories (such as the urban system or urban actors) which he proposes as explanatory devices. They are uncritically and unjustifiably assumed to be "specifications" of more "general laws" whose basis is never actually examined.

In addition to these methodological rules, Castells also proposes a number of hypotheses. Among the latter are the following:

"The greater the number of accumulated contradictions, the greater the mobilising potential of the social charge." (1976c, p. 169.)

"The more contradictions are in the economic or derived from contradictions in this instance the more important they are. On the other hand, the more they are political or ideological, the more capable they are of being integrated into a regulation of the system.

16. Castells summarises this argument diagrammatically (Castells, 1976c, p. 164 and 1977a, p. 267). Like most of Castells's diagrams (which tend to resemble, to use Glass's accurate if unflattering description, "the drawings of some lunatic plumbing system, bespattered with weird verbiage" (Glass, 1977, p. 668)), its heuristic merit is dubiously obscure.

The more the contradictions are divided up in their treatment, the less chance there is of confrontation and mobilisation.

When there is lack of correspondence between the elements that define the 'actors' present the contradictions may be expressed only through the articulation of these isolated elements in other fields of social practices." (1977a, p. 271.)

These hypotheses represent, for Castells, possible explanations or urban social movements, although there is actually no indication of why they are regarded as either possible or plausible explanations. The more fundamental problem, however, with Castells's hypotheses concerns their operationalisation. This is because Castells's hypotheses (as well as his concepts in general) have no clearly identifiable empirical meaning. This becomes apparent from a consideration of such concepts as "integration", "regulation", "confrontation", "mobilisation", "mobilising potential", "social change", "contradiction", etc., whose precise empirical meaning is far from evident. In other words, for purposes of both clarity and research, Castells's methodological rules and hypotheses require a further clarification as to how they may be used for classifying (and ultimately explaining) empirical data. Castells fails to provide that clarification, a failure which is particularly apparent in his research.

In addition to the general problems associated with Castells's methodological rules and hypotheses, there are also a number of substantive problems in his treatment of urban social movements. Two such weaknesses may be noted. The first concerns his assumption about the nature of organisations. As a result of emphatically altering the focus of analysis from organisations to structures and the "effect" of the former upon the latter, Castells tends to assume that organisations are a readily available and uniform means for the expression of urban social movements. This assumption is severely deficient because it fails to consider that organisations vary in a great number of ways, depending on, *inter alia*, their resources, their aims, their membership, their geographical location, their connection with other organisations, etc. This potential variety among organisations may prove to be an important factor in determining the possible "effect" of an urban social movement upon the social structure. It is primarily for this reason that Castells's treatment of organisations is deficient.¹⁷

17. The potential influence of different types of organisation is cogently suggested by Pickvance's distinction between two types of organisation, namely, horizontally integrated organisations (i.e., those organisations that are related to other organisations or institutions within a particular community or locality) and vertically integrated organisations (i.e., those organisations that are related to other organisations or institutions outside the community) (Pickvance, 1975, p. 41). The significance of the distinction is that it provides a basis for suggesting the hypothesis that (perhaps) vertically integrated organisations, which have access to such resources as premises, secretarial facilities, leadership, funds, etc. may have a greater chance of achieving their aims (in this case, "urban effects") than do horizontally integrated organisations which may lack all the above facilities.

The second weakness with Castells's proposal to study urban social movements is the failure to consider the factors which may be operative in influencing "social groups" to participate and mobilise in an urban social movement. Castells tends to assume that the existence of a particular "issue" or "stake" necessarily leads to mobilisation in an urban social movement. However, as Pickvance (1977) has pointed out, there are a variety of factors which affect the way in which a social group or "social base" responds to a particular problem before it becomes a "social force" in an urban social movement. Such factors may include the racial, ethnic and social divisions in the social base, the extent of kinship and friendship relations in the particular area, the diversity of attitudes towards the particular problem, the availability of organisational resources, etc. Each of these factors may be crucial in determining the extent of "mobilisation" in an urban social movement. Their neglect, therefore, in Castells's theoretical and empirical work must be regarded as an important weakness.

This analysis of Castells's theory of urban social movements has revealed two problems, one minor, the other major. The first (minor) problem concerns his definition of urban social movements which, as has been seen, is excessively and unnecessarily narrow because it confines the latter to one particular type of change and because it treats urban social movements as the only possible source of this change. However, as has been seen, this definitional problem tends to be avoided in his actual research where urban social movements are treated as synonymous, not with Castells's definition, but with protest movements generally.

The second (major) problem is that Castells loosely applies Marx's historical materialist analysis to the study of urban social movements (and urban politics generally), not by a critical examination and rigorous elaboration of its basic assumptions and propositions (which, in their present state, have serious deficiencies), but through the multiplication of elaborate taxonomies (such as the urban system and the system of urban actors). Moreover, even as a taxonomic device, Castells's use of historical materialism is still highly problematic due, as has been seen, to the problems of operationalising this taxonomy.

VIII CONCLUSIONS

The examination of Castells's application of historical materialism to the study of urban agglomerations has revealed certain serious and fundamental weaknesses and inadequacies. The overall conclusion of this examination is that the conceptual core of Castells's work is, in general, unconvincing, unrigorous, and uninformative. This is so for two related reasons: firstly

because there is no clear or rigorous specification of the basic assumptions, concepts and propositions of historical materialism and secondly, because various categories and taxonomies are developed without any consideration of their informative or explanatory use. In short, Castells's historical materialist analysis of urban agglomerations is deficient, not only according to the criteria of historical materialism, but according to the criteria of any analysis.

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