

Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives
Professor R. Santosh
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 31
Manuel Castells: Theory of Space and Flows

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)



Manuel Castells: Theory of space and flows

Manuel Castells: The theory of network society by Felix Stalder

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Welcome back to the class, we are continuing our discussion on Manuel Castells. So, as I mentioned in the previous class, Castells is one of the very influential sociologists who contributed significantly to our theoretical understanding on globalization. And in the previous class, we looked at some of his very provocative arguments about reorienting the epistemological as well as methodological foundations of sociology. So, he argued that the society in which we are living or a globalized society is a quite different one from that of a society characterized in the period of modernity, and he argues that the very structure of society is being changed into that of a networked society and hence, the discipline used to reorient and reinvent itself.

So, now, keeping that particular discussion aside, we are now going back to the central concern of this particular chapter, that is the whole question about time, space and questions of flows, or the larger theoretical theme or spatio-temporal dimensions of globalization. How did or how do scholars understand the kind of transformations happening or happened in the very fundamental concepts such as time, space and place?

So, this class as well as the next class, it is a direct continuation from our, long discussions on Giddens, on Harvey, on Sassen and we will conclude it with Manuel Castells. His argument about network society, his argument about spaces and flows are all written in various books. So, I am not in a position to directly use the book because it becomes, too elaborate.

So, for this class, and the next class, I am using a text from a book written by Felix Stalder, 'Manuel Castells: the theory of network society', it is a very interesting book where he has

summarized the basic arguments of Manuel Castells. So, I have prepared a PowerPoint presentation based on Stalder's work.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:35)



- "there is no theory of space that is not an integral part of a general social theory". Castells
- In such a perspective, space is not a container. Space is not a given, nor is it stable. Rather, space is constituted by social relations and transformed along with them.
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and his debate with Newton on the nature of space
- Leibniz argued, that space is created in between things, and therefore there can be no such thing as empty space, not the least because this would be a substance without properties. It is the objects that create space. Space is constituted by the relationship among these objects. Without objects, there is nothing in between, hence there is no space.



So, he argues there is no, so for Castells, space is not outside the theorization of social theory. So, he would argue that social theory you cannot have a social theory without having a theory on space, because if you are talking about social, space is inherent in that. If you are talking about social relationship, space is an ingrained part of that.

So, there is no theory of space that is not an integral part of a general social theory and this is a very important argument because this is significantly different from an argument which looks at space as an absolute thing, space has something as separate, which has its own existence, something outside, external, so, heavily influenced by Newtonian understanding of physics.

So, this is very, very different from that. Now, in such a perspective, space is not a container, space is not a given nor it is stable, rather space is constituted by social relations and transformed along with them. And this is very important argument, that usually when you look at a space you understand space as a container with a kind of a boundary in which a lot of things happen.

People move around within a given space people, so, you understand it as given as already there as pre-existing in which people come and then work and then interact and then go and the space remains the same. And this is a very old understanding, this is a very old understanding, and a more productive understanding of space is that of space is constituted by social relations.

We are actually creating space, space is created or spaces renewed, is created, a new it is created actively and, and social relations, people who involved in these social relations are also creating new spaces in that. It is transformed, it is created every day through social interaction. So, in that sense, Stalder argues that Castells is heavily influenced by Leibniz, this very important term in a philosopher, German philosopher Leibniz of this eighteenth century and his debate with Newton on the nature of space.

Where Newton talks about an absolute space, space as given which is stable, which can be measured Leibniz argues that it is relational. So, this distinction is very different. So, this deeper philosophical debate is very important. So, Leibniz argued that space is created between things and therefore, there can be no such thing as an empty space.

So, contrary to the understanding that there could be an empty space, without anybody anything there, Leibniz argued that you can think of space only there are, as a kind of space in between things. So, people or elements or objects are so constitutive of the very constitution of space without anything, without any people without any object there is simply no space, so this space does not make any sense.

So, not the least, because this world would be a substance without properties, it is the object that creates space, it is objects that create space, it is not that there is a space already there and then objects come and then occupy that space, space is constituted by the relationship among these objects. Without objects, there is nothing in between, hence, there is no space. So, this is very fundamental and I realized there is a much more detailed, deeper, philosophical debates and theoretical debate which we are not going into that between Leibniz and Newton.

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- “Space as a social product is always specified by a definite relation between the different instances of social structure, the economic, the political, the ideological, and the conjuncture of social relations that result from them. Space, therefore, is always an historical conjuncture and a social form that derives its meaning from the social processes that are expressed through it. [Consequently,] it is absolutely necessary to study the production of spatial forms on the basis of the underlying social structure”.
 - Space, in the last resort, cannot be conceived without time. They are expressed through one another. In Castells’s perspective, their relationship is such that “space is the material support of timesharing social practices. . . . [It] brings together those practices that are simultaneous in time.” If social actors are not present in the same space, they cannot share time, that is, interact in real time. For much of history, the only space that allowed for time-sharing was a place that is, “a locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity.”



But keep in mind that Castells' theorization is heavily influenced by this Leibniz argument. So, this is a quote from Castells – “Space as a social product is always specified by a definite relation between the different instances of social structures; the economic, the political, the ideological, and the conjecture of social relations that result from them. Space therefore, is always an historical conjecture, and a social form that derives its meaning from the social processes that are expressed through it.”

So, the fundamental point of Castells’ argument is that space is a historical product. There is nothing like an eternal space, there is nothing like an absolute space, which has been in existence from the beginning, and then we simply come and then occupy and then go back. So, space is created every day and it is created through social processes, it is a product of history, it is produced historically, it is produced as per the social processes. So, it is a social process that create the kind of social space. Consequently, it is absolutely necessary to study the production of the spatial forms of the basis of the underlying social structure.

So, his fundamental argument is that every social structure produces its corresponding social space. And you cannot simply study space on its own right on its own on basis, rather, it is produced and in order to see how the space is produced, you need to look at the larger social structure that actually produces this particular entity. Space in the last resort cannot be conceived without time.

We know that because when you talk about this temporal, spatio-temporal aspects, so, time and space is supposed to be something so close to each other something so, significant. They are expressed through one another. In Castells perspective, their relationship is such that space is the material support for time sharing social practices. Space is the material support for time sharing social practices.

So, what does it mean? Space is the material support for time sharing social practices. So, if a group of people are able to interact in the real time, this real time is made possible through various kinds of spaces that exist between them. If two people sit here, if there is a student, somebody sitting along with me in this room, we are able to share the same time. I can see him or he can see me, he can listen to me, we can have a conversation because of the very quality of this particular space.

And this space, as you know, is place because we both are occupying the similar kind of physical space, we are here. So, we are able to share the same time because of the very given space that is provided to us. At the same time if this person is some 50 kilometres away, and without any telecommunication facilities, without any phone call, internet or anything we are simply not able to share the same time because of course, we might be sitting there but nothing happens between us.

At the same time, if we are connected through a video call or an internet facility or a Google meet or a Zoom meet or something, then we are again able to communicate with each other and the space undergoes significant transformation. So, his fundamental definition of space is that space is the material support of time-sharing social practices. It brings together those practices that are simultaneous in time. If social actors are not present in the same space, they cannot share time, that is, interact in real time.

The same example that I mentioned you, if I am sitting here and if somebody is there in city in the US and if we are not able to interact then we are simply not sharing the time. For much of history, the only space that allowed for time sharing was a place, that is a locale whose form function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity. So, this is something that we have discussed earlier.

For a long time, since human civilization the only place where the real time sharing was possible is the physical place, people have to be there and then, people need to be there in order to interact. You simply do not have the possibility of interacting with people who are sitting far off. Every incident, every interaction, every social process happened in a given space at a given time. And if that were to happen, they had to occupy the same physical space, same physical place, given geography.

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- The space of time-sharing was assumed to be a place because time and space were taken to be coextensive. Analyzing the restructuring of capitalist production during the 1980s, Castells concluded that this common sense was no longer justified. Rather, a new type of space had been created. It enabled social actors to share time across places. Suddenly social actors could be in the same temporal space without being in the same physical space. In this restructuring process, institutions, mainly capitalist firms, actively expanded the space of flows to the point where it became the material basis for the dominant processes in the network society. According to Castells, the threshold was passed in the second half of the 1980s.



The space of time sharing was assumed to be a place because time and space were taken to be coextensive, because time and space are same, and then it becomes a place where the interaction take place. Analysing the restructuring of capitalist production during the 1980s Castells concludes that this common sense was no longer justified. Rather, a new type of space had been created, it enabled social actors to share time across places.

Suddenly, social actors could be in the same temporal space without being the same physical space. Something which is so simple, something we just know been taken for so granted with, we understand and especially in this context of pandemic of COVID-19, you know that online classes are taking place, online meetings are taking place, people are not traveling. But still, education classes are going on, interactions are going on seminars are going on, business meets are going on, and they are all happening on the real time with participants from across the globe.

So, this he says is a fundamental transformation. This is a fundamental transformation, something unimaginable, say 100 years ago, and then there was, the technological innovations came gradually, there was a telegram and then the telephone and then fax machine and then internet and then of course, all the possibilities of video calling and then other kind of high-speed internet infrastructure.

So, this he says is something quite new. In this restructuring process, institutions, mainly capitalist firms actively expanded the space of flows to the point where it became the material basis for the dominant processes in the network society. According to Castells, this threshold was passed in the second half of the 1980s. So, he roughly identifies 1980s as the as a passing threshold, passing a particular boundary.

Because, you know this many of these information technology things did exist before that, radio existed, television existed, fax existed, telegram existed, but the latter part of 1985 onwards, you are entering into the realm of internet, which is qualitatively very different, it has taken the possibilities of human interaction to a completely new level.

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The Space of Flows - spaces & places

- Castells suggests that there is a historical limit to the process of "time/space compression." Contrary to postmodern visions of finality, time and space are fundamental categories of social life and cannot disappear. Computer networks are not black holes. At one point, the negative, quantitative dynamic of compression (less space, less time) turns into a qualitatively new condition (a new type of space/time). This is exactly what Castells proposes with his concept of the space of flows: a new material basis for time-sharing on which the dominant social processes are reorganized and managed through flows. That is, through "purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors"



So, now he is introducing this whole concept of spaces of flows. So, before that, I hope you understood what is meant by the spaces of places. This, he always makes as two contrasting ideas, spaces of places are the conventional one, the traditional one where people have to be the same and people will have to be there at the same time at a given place. Only then social interaction takes place.

So, he says that this space of flows is distinctly different from that of the spaces of places. Castells suggests that there is a historical limit to the process of time space compression. Now, this is the way Castells makes this very important significant contribution, I am inviting your attention to the argument of Giddens, when he talks about time space distancing, and see all of them are talking about the same thing.

All of them are, whether Giddens or Harvey are Castells, they are all trying to make sense of what is happened to the global world, especially after the introduction of internet, that is a simple question that they are all trying to understand, but all of them are putting it in slightly different ways. So, when Giddens talks about time space distancing, when he says that at the given time, social relations are distanced, it is expanded across the globe, Harvey talks about time space compression.

They are, the same imagination, but both imaginations coming from the both other extremes. But Castells' intervention is something very important, what he says is that there is a historical limit to the process of time space compression. You cannot keep on have this time space compression eternally, because contrary to the postmodern vision of finality, where time and space are fundamental categories of social life and cannot disappear.

So, for us against quite a lot of postmodernist argument about the disappearance of time and space, he argues time and space simply cannot disappear. They are so fundamental categories, but what has happened is that, a dramatic transformation has taken place, computer networks are not black holes. At one point, the negative quantitative dynamics of compression, that is less space and less time turns into a qualitatively new condition, a new type of space and time.

So, when you talk about time space compression, less space and less time, it turns out into something quite positive. This is exactly what Castells proposes with his conception of the spaces of flows, a new material basis for time sharing on which the dominant social processes

are reorganized and managed through flows. So, he argues that this time, space compression cannot go because you cannot really compress the space the places beyond the point.

So, what has happened is that a new kind of material, this term material is something very important. A new material basis has emerged for times time sharing, time training, again, I am inviting her attention to the point that we are able to interact in real time, that is all, it does not mean that it has to be, we both need to sit in the same place, we need to see each other physically, the only point is that we must be able to interact in the real time.

So, he argues that a new material form has emerged, which enables this time-sharing process. So that is through purposeful repetitive programmable sequence of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors. So, he talks about it as flows, spaces of flows enabled by internet, enabled by micro electric forms which, that is through purposeful repetitive programmable sequence of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors. So, this is the definition that he used to the whole idea of spaces of flows.

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- This new space, the space of flows, does not replace the geographical space; rather, by selectively connecting places to one another, it changes their functional logic and social dynamics.
 - The space of flows does not indicate a linear shrinking of distance, but the establishment of an environment with a completely different, nonlinear spatial logic. Being part of the space of flows means being part of a context whose functional logic is based on real-time interaction, no matter in which places its constitutive elements are located.
 - The key to Castells's conception of the space of flows is its materiality, because it foregrounds how expensive and complex it is to create, maintain and navigate that space.



So, this new space, the space of flows, does not replace the geographical space, rather by selectively connecting places to one another, it changes their functional logic and social dynamics. And this is again not a new idea which we have come across, when we discuss Saskia Sassen, when we discussed the Swapna Guha Banerjee, we know that how this physicality or the physical part is not becoming irrelevant, but they are changing its character, their functions are changing, their relevance is changing.

So, this new space of the space of flow, it is selectively connecting places to one another, it changes their functional logic and social dynamics. The spaces of flows do not indicate a linear shrinkage of distance, but the establishment of an environment with a completely different nonlinear spatial logic. So, this nonlinear spatial logic as we discussed that in the previous class, from the very local, to the regional, to the national, to the international.

This was the scalar or the notions of scales, that were familiar with or the notions of the space that we had about it from the local we go to the regional and to the national and then to the

international. Now, this this order has been completely scrambled. A particular region a particular local can have directly integrated by bypassing the nation into what is understood as a global or a whole region can be completely isolated having nothing much to do with the globe.

So, this taken for granted linear relations have been completely scrambled, their order, their established system has been completely disrupted. Being part of the spaces of flows means being part of a context whose functional logic is based on real time interaction, no matter in which place its constitutive elements are located. So, the only point which decides whether a certain thing is a part of a spaces of flow is whether it is part of this global process.

And it may be, as Castells mentioned in the previous thing, a particular block in New York City or on Mumbai city could be a part in a global city, but that particular block may not be a part of it global processes. The key to Castells' conception of the space of flows is its materiality because it foregrounds how expensive and complex is it to create, maintain and navigate these places.

So, this materiality is something important, materiality comes down to the whole cost of materials that are used, its economic aspects, its, its physical aspects, the kind of internet tables, the kind of equipment that you use, the kind of tools that we use, the kind of money that it goes, the role of capital involved in it, the role of technology that is involved in it. So, all these material elements are becoming important.

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• He identifies three important elements of this spaces of flow:

1. Circuits of electronic exchanges including internet and high-speed transport,
2. a "distributed network around nodes and hubs" which results in the critical mass necessary for the material basis of such flows. Global cities as examples
3. The places 'where the people meet and elites constitute themselves'...gated communities, VIP areas etc
4. "the geography of the new history will not be made, after all, of the separation between places and flows, but out of the interface between places and flows and between cultures and social interests, both in the space of flows and in the space of places."



He identifies three important elements of this spaces of flow, one is circuits of electronic exchange, including internet and high-speed transport. We know that, when you talk about networks, it is always these lines and then a hub and a node. So, these networks indicates circuits of electronic exchange, including internet and also high-speed transport. So, it is not only the internet that is taken into account, the high-speed transportation corridor, high speed air connectivity, rail connectivity, water connectivity.

So, all these things are taken into account. Second point is a distributed network around nodes and hubs, which results in the critical mass necessary for the material basis of such flows, global cities as examples. When you when you talk about networks, usually it is something like

this, you talk about certain hubs and nodes it is not? So, this particular entity what we call it as a node or a hub, it requires certain minimum critical mass, it requires certain minimal amount of people, number of institutions, number of organizations, number of technological components, only then it can serve as a hub.

So, if you look into any of these major global cities, examples of global cities like Hong Kong or Mumbai or New York or London, these are the place which has a conglomeration of all these institutions, elites, technological giants, multinational companies, marketing firms, accounting firms, advertisement firms, consumption firms, so, everything is put together, they are all there and that is why it becomes a hub, that is why and so, that is a materiality of this whole thing.

And exactly in a similar way, a host of other small towns and other places are being systematically excluded from this whole process, a place which has been witnessing serious, say, internal conflict, Civil War, a city which is witnessing civil war, Baghdad for example, or Mosul for example, or Kabul for example, these are the places which are not part of this whole global processes.

So, this ability to have a critical mass is something very important. And third one, he says, is the places where the people meet and elites constitute themselves and these also are the places where you actually require people and people, especially the elite, the kind of infrastructure that they require, they would want a gated communities they would want, high grade VIP areas, ultra-luxurious places, restaurants, and then, what not.

So, these places offer that, the kind of exclusive elite kind of spaces. So, all these things he argues are the features of this material basis of these spaces of flow. The geography of the new history will not be made, after all of the separation between the places and flows, but out of the interface between places and flows and between cultures and social interest, both in the space of flows and spaces of places.

So, again to repeat, he is not saying that the spaces of places is becoming irrelevant, he is saying that their grammar, they are being re oriented, they are being reformulated. And in new material base, that is the spaces of flow comes into picture, and which does not replace spaces of places, but it reformulates, it is a very powerful argument.

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- Castells argues that technologies have certain biases that shape the social organization built with them.
- Within the space of flows, there are, in principle, only two states of distance: "here" and "not here," presence and absence, no distance and infinite distance. It is this condition that allows nodes to flexibly connect within one another, no matter where they are located, because they are all "here" in the same time-sharing environment that is the space of flows. The connection between nodes, then, is dominated by functional considerations. Conventionally the functional logic and the geographic logic overlapped and stabilized one another. Not anymore. Now they are being decoupled through the space of flows.



So, Castells argues that technologies have certain biases that shape the social organization built with them. Within the spaces of flows, there are, in principle, only two states of distance. When we talk about the spaces of flow, only two possibilities are there, either you are here or you are not here, either you are present or you are absent. No distance and infinite distance, either there is no distance or there is infinite distance.

And, you know, when you are when you when you attend a webinar, when you attend a Google meet, either you get connected or you do not get connected, there is nothing in between and the distance from where you are separated from the speaker hardly matters. A speaker for a webinar could be somebody from your own city and a person from the US might be able to listen to her, but even if you are the neighbour of that particular speaker, if you are not connected, then you are not connected.

You are, either you are here or you are not there or you are present or you are absence. This is the condition that allows nodes to flexibly connect within one another no matter where they are located because they are all here in the same time-sharing environment that is the spaces of flows, the connection between nodes then is dominated by functional considerations, it is not the conventional scalar, logic that matters, but it is the functional logic.

Why that that particular place is significant in the larger scheme of affairs? Why should an organization have to do something to do with a particular country or a particular city or a part of a city? And only if that is functionally relevant, then that city becomes important. Conventionally the functional logic and the geographic logic overlapped and stabilized one another, not anymore. Now, they are being decoupled through the spaces of flows.

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"while organizations are located in places, and their components are place-dependent, the organizational logic is placeless, being fundamentally dependent on the space of flows that characterizes information networks. But such flows are structured, not undetermined. They possess directionality, conferred both by the hierarchical logic of the organization as reflected in instructions given, and by the material characteristics of the information systems infrastructure"

This is the core of Castells's concept of the transformation of space.



So now, while again, a quotation from Castells. While organizations are located in places and their components are place-dependent, the organizational logic is placeless. Being fundamentally dependent on the spaces of flows that characterizes information networks, but such flows are structured not undetermined they processes directionality conferred both by the hierarchical logic of the organization as reflected in the instructions given and by the material characteristics of the information systems infrastructure.

So, he is arguing that while organizations are located in places, you have a headquarter then you have their regional heads and then the national heads and then regional heads, but their components are place-dependent, they are located in places and their components are place dependent, but their organizational logic is placeless.

Global head could be of a firm could be sitting anywhere, but he will be able to have real time interaction with the heads of all his unit by sitting in any part of the world, in any corner of the world. So, that organizational logic is quite different, it being fundamentally influenced by the logic of the spaces of flow, fundamentally dependent on the space of flow that characterizes information networks.

But such flows are structured, not undetermined. Again, these flows are not very arbitrary, it is not, they are heavily influenced by a host of other material aspects. They process directionality conferred both by the hierarchical logic of the organization as reflected in the infrastructure given by the material characteristics of the information systems of infrastructure.

So, this is the core of Castells conception of the transformation of space. So, as we discussed, just to have a brief recap, he brings in a very refreshing argument to further the arguments of Giddens and Harvey. So, when both of them use the term time space distancing or time space compression, Castells argues that it is not a negative compression or that is happening rather a new material basis was coming at that is nothing but the spaces of flows.

So, the spaces of flows and which happened through the network is what is the basic structural feature of social organization in the era of globalization and this, he argues, is fundamentally different, significantly different from the previous model or the industrial modern industrial world that we were familiar. And he, as we discussed, he identifies 1980s as a rough period, a rough period in which at least Western Europe or the Western societies have passed that threshold.

So, this is his argument about the notions of space and in the coming class, we will discuss his argument about transformations in the concept of time. So, we will stop here, and we will meet you in the next class. Thank you.