Castells, Power and Social Work

Abstract

This article reflects on the important sociological contribution made by Manuel Castells. The potential implications for social work theory and practice are considered, especially in relation to his theories of networks and power. The article acknowledges Castells' thesis that we are witnessing a 'transformational' phase in social development, as 'networks' become fundamentally significant as a vehicle for ordering and shaping human lives. The interactions within and between social networks are considered, especially in relation to the domains of social work practice, and their inevitable concerns with processes of inclusion/exclusion and oppression. In light of these reflections, Castells' typology of network/power is introduced, and the relationship between structural and relational aspects of the typology is considered. The capacity of power-infused networks to construct and organise people's experiences is acknowledged, as are the implications for those who use social work services, and are often the objects rather than the subjects of power relations.

Set against this, are arguments for the potential to develop forms of 'resistance', for instance through 'network-making'; this is exemplified by reference to social work practice. The article concludes with positive messages for the social work project, to the extent that practitioners are able to adopt a capacity-building role.

Key words: Castells, power, networks, resistance, network-making

Social Work and Contemporary Challenges

Social Work is an applied discipline, whose practice orientation is necessarily associated with issues of inequality, disadvantage and asymmetric power relationships. It is essentially a given that those with whom social work engages will have experienced difficult and possibly oppressive circumstances, which are rooted in their relationships with other people and/or with social systems. As these systems themselves have been transformed, with the dynamics of globalisation and the influence of information and communication technologies, in particular, it may be appropriate to reappraise the implications of contemporary change for social work and those who use social work services.

Negotiating and addressing the problems of complex and unequal social relationships in changing times is a central and recurrent feature of practitioners' interventions; this, in turn, forces us to consider the significance of power imbalances and unequal access to resources in the lives of those concerned. Amongst other things, there has been emerging interest, for example, in the implications of the 'digital divide' for social work as a form of practice (Steyaert and Gould, 2009). What is the nature of these inequalities, and how are they reproduced, challenged or changed through the intervention process undertaken by social work practitioners?

In order to address this kind of question it is important to be able to bring to bear on it a clear conceptualisation of the origins and dynamics of contemporary power relationships. Good practice depends on the articulation and appreciation of this kind of insight. In what follows, I want to suggest that the contributions of Manuel Castells offer a possible means of theorising 'power' and social networks with particular potential value for those engaged in the social work task. This aspiration is largely based on the view that Castells' insights and conclusions offer a framework within which contemporary social forms and practices can more clearly be understood; and this, in turn, will support better informed and more sensitive practice in a complex social world. His work is not without its critics, but it has recently opened up areas of debate, such as the tensions between 'networks', 'power' and 'identity' (Castells, 2004) which have a particular contemporary resonance; this in turn suggests the possibility of new approaches to practice building on these insights.

Global Influences, Castells and the 'Network Society'

It is increasingly obvious that technology has infused all aspects of social life in the contemporary era. These developments appear to have taken place very rapidly, leading to dramatic changes in the day-to-day practices of social interaction and exchange. The sense that our lives and experiences

have been transformed through these developments is strong, and it seems that there is a relationship between these changes and the patterns and dynamics of social organisation, with inevitable consequences for all aspects of society. Because of the 'pervasiveness' of these changes, Castells (2010, p. 5) chooses this as the starting point for his analysis. Even our relationships and our internal lives appear to have been affected, in ways which have been hard to anticipate, and whose consequences are difficult to apprehend. Indeed, Castells argues that the extent of these essentially technological changes has been such that social relations have themselves been 'transformed', to the extent that new forms of communication, cultural production and social interaction have come to exert determinant influences on the ways in which social life is organised and experienced. This transformation can be characterised in terms of a number of key features (Castells, 2007, p. 239), including:

- the emergence of a new form of communication related to the culture and technology of the network society... mass self-communication;
- and the uses of both one-dimensional mass communication and mass self-communication in the relationship between power and counter-power... in the new manifestation of social movements.

Clearly, in Castells' view the increasingly diverse media and new web-based forms of communication have a central place in contemporary processes of social transformation. These have quite distinct implications for the construction and circulation of knowledge, the ways in which we express ourselves, social identity, what counts as 'truth', and how we construct and present our own narratives of self.

But, as Castells cautions, 'technology does not determine society: it embodies it' (2010, p. 5). It symbolises and reflects wider and more diverse dynamics. These technological changes and their significant consequences for the individual are dependent on broader patterns and influences, which necessitates a parallel understanding of the material realities of new social networks and restructured social relationships and the power vested in and articulated through them.

According to Castells (2010), it is indeed the 'network' which is the central feature of the contemporary transformation of society. As a cohesive and integrative phenomenon, it therefore represents a fundamentally different view of the world to that associated with postmodernist analyses which articulate their observations essentially in terms of atomisation and fragmentation. Whilst there may be features of networks which act in ways which isolate and individualise, these outcomes are only possible through the operation of systems and processes which make

connections, from the interpersonal to the global, which convey common messages and constructions, even as they address people increasingly in relatively private and confined forms of interaction and communication. Castells suggests for example, that this process has implications for identity formation: 'The search for meaning takes place... in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles' (2004, p. 11), in the face of the blurring of established certainties and recognised boundaries defining societies and cultures (Smith, 2008, p. 77).

Castells prefaces his analysis of networks by making three important observations. Firstly, in stressing their transformational qualities, and echoing Marx's observation that quantitative change will at some point result in 'qualitative' change, he distinguishes the features of contemporary networks from their historical aspects:

> [W]hile networks are an old form of organisation in the human experience, digital networking technologies, characteristic of the information age, powered social and organisational networks in ways that assured their endless expansion and reconfiguration... (Castells, 2010, p. xviii)

Technology may be a key driver of new and distinctive forms of social organisation, but we should nonetheless be careful to distinguish between its role as facilitator and the social processes with which it is implicated. These have developed distinctive features of their own, which stand alongside but are characterised by human attributes and intentions. It would be too simplistic to attribute an impersonal phenomenon such as technology in its many forms with the capacity to exercise a fundamentally determinant influence on human realities and practices. Castells is always careful to avoid adopting a simplistic determinist position. Nonetheless:

> Because networks do not stop at the border of the nation-state, the network society constituted itself as a global system, ushering in the new form of globalisation characteristic of our time. (Castells, 2010, p. xviii)

Conscious of the risk of over-simplification, and the need to avoid overstating the degree of homogeneity between individuals, groups and communities, Castells also acknowledges that 'networks' and 'networking' are bound to take variable forms and have equally diverse impacts in a multi-faceted and unequal social context:

> However, while everything and everybody on the planet felt the effects of the new social structure, global networks included some people and territories while excluding others, so inducing a geography of social, economic and technological inequality. (Castells, 2010, p. xviii)

The 'Power' of Networks

Castells relates inequality in its contemporary manifestations to power relationships embedded in the fabric of social networks. In order to elaborate an analytical framework capable of describing and aiding understanding of these, he has constructed a fourfold conceptual map, according to which we may appreciated the distribution and impacts of the mechanisms and dynamics of power, namely: network power, networked power, networking power and network-making power. Clearly, this is an attempt also to offer a nuanced approach to our understanding of power itself, which cannot readily be understood in straightforward quantitative or zero-sum terms (Smith, 2008).

1. *Network power*

    This is represented as the extent of the material capacity to change or control events and outcomes held by networks at any given point in time, such as the capacity to exercise influence over key aspects of peoples' lives held by formal social services systems, for example.

2. *Networked power*

    This is differentiated from the first category in that it is intended to represent the relational power that is diffused through networks, being realised at the point where specific interactions occur; in the social work context, this might be experienced as the direct application of rules over eligibility for services, in adult social care, for instance.

3. *Networking power*

    This category represents a more active process, whereby the network and its communication systems are utilised to activate and initiate power relations, perhaps in ways which are distinctive and innovative; the establishment of *ad hoc* inter-professional teams in child protection may be one form by which this kind of power relationship is realised, to the extent that it constitutes a new locus of expertise and legitimacy.

4. *Network-making power*

    Castells' analysis is not purely one-sided. He recognises that while networks and networking might be the prevailing forms of human organisation and 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984), this also permits the possibility of the exercise of human agency in constructing, populating and activating new networks in the interests of specific social

groups. Here lies the considerable potential for forming coalitions of resistance, and the realisation of 'counter power' (Castells, 2007); organisations of people with learning difficulties, such as People First, are one such example. Indeed, as networking becomes more pervasive and increasingly 'normal', the potential for such alternative vehicles for self-expression and opposition arising also intensifies.

Changing Global Realities: the Context for Social Work

The context in which Castells has developed his analysis is one of rapid and transformational global change, in which our changing modes of communication and exchange have had powerful and dramatic consequences at all levels from the global to that of individual 'identity' (Castells, 2004); paradoxically there has emerged a much greater sense of connectedness and awareness of what is happening around the world, in parallel with the destabilisation of existing forms of social and communal organisation. These changes can be seen to have both direct and indirect implications for social work and the people with whom it engages, as their lives are transformed, disrupted or otherwise made problematic in some way. We can perhaps restate some of the material consequences of globalisation and the emergence of the 'network society' here, albeit widely reported before, in order to sketch out what this might mean for social work.

1). Transcending borders

Greater mobility of all kinds (people, money, communication, knowledge) has led to a diminution of the significance and materiality of borders, especially those between nation states, but not exclusively these. For example, the mass media are by now best viewed as a global phenomenon, connecting people at great distances, and contributing to a sense of shared experience, but at the same time acting as a vehicle for the dispersal of cultural norms and a prevailing social, economic and moral order. Equally, we can observe the manner in which finance and the movement of money around the world seems to be virtually unaffected by the constraints of jurisdictional boundaries, operating in the form of networks of capital (Castells, 2010, p. 122).

 In parallel with this, it is also obvious that goods and their markets have an increasingly transnational flavour to them. This in one sense provides for an increasing sense of homogeneity around the world, as we all recognise and respond in the same way to certain iconic logos, but behind this, it is also the case that there lies an increasing sense of uncertainty and transience about employment and job security, and all that entails. This in turn has led to increasing economic pressures on communities, which have experienced disruption and changing populations:

> Globalization has impacted extensively on social workers by affecting relationships between practitioners and their clients, internationalizing social problems and changing the nature of the nation-state. (Dominelli, 2010, p. 130)

So too, has the nature and logic of practice been substantially affected, the extent that pervasive forms of 'marketisation' (Harris, 2003) have tended to supersede the specific operating conditions of local settings and jurisdictions.

2). Movement and conflict

Population movements are also increasingly evident as the result of traumatic events, such as war and environmental disaster. We can expect there to be issues of conflict and risk arising from the changing mix of human populations, and clashes of interest, both economic and cultural. The 'social' itself is the subject of continuous renegotiation and renewal, and this experience of churning is further problematized where people are likely to be in competition over scarce resources (jobs, money, housing, community facilities), or where incompatible or misunderstood belief systems come into close proximity.

Movement of people is also significant to the extent that it represents potential loss: of family, community, and of friends, leaving people less well placed to provide the kind of supportive networks for each other that appear to be an integral aspiration of the 'Big Society' concept.

We must note the very substantial implications of the continual transformation and remaking of families, communities and social groupings that this represents. Problems are likely to be especially acute where large numbers of people are displaced for reasons of conflict, disaster, or economic upheaval, but where their destinations are also likely to be places which have been subject to their own experiences of destabilisation and transition. So it is, in social work terms, that the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees are likely to lead to a particular constellation of challenges, where social networks are weakened, disrupted or broken and where the opportunities to rebuild them are limited and constrained (see Beirens et al, 2007).

3). Changing social relationships

As indicated, change is a predictable consequence of globalisation, as it has been experienced in the recent past, and as is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. This suggests that social relationships are themselves likely to be subject to recurrent pressures to adapt and reform, perhaps reflecting a greater degree of external uncertainty in their own fragility and unsustainability.

Family structures and composition, for example, have already been radically transformed as a result of a combination of factors in the recent past, notably economic restructuring, and the declining availability or influence of established reference points, such as elders or community leaders, as these resources, too, become more diffused and diluted, and less reliable as organising institutions.

At the same time, it is noted, the emergence of new forms of communication and engagement through the internet and social networks has led to the proliferation of 'weak social ties' (Castells, 2010, p. 388), perhaps at the expense of more substantial and permanent community bonds. As argued recently in the pages of this journal, this trend poses specific challenges for social work practice, as people increasingly:

> ... make connections or join networks that are dissimilar or heterogeneous in some manner. The dissimilarities reduce the levels of trust, obligation and reciprocity amongst members, which increases the amount of effort necessary for interaction to occur (Hawkins and Maurer, 2011, p. 8).

As the terrain of social work moves back into view, Inequality and exclusion, of course, are regarded as critical phenomena in this field; it therefore seems important to consider in more depth the 'modes of exclusion' (Rossiter, 2000, p. 31) which feature prominently in the network society as its power dynamics are articulated. In particular, it is important to review the relationship between acknowledged social problems such as inequality and discrimination, and the ways in which these may be intensified by the manner in which money, say, and credit flow and accumulate.

Other elements of human capital, too, are unevenly distributed within and between networks, including information, influence, legitimacy, expertise and technological resources and support. For some, exclusion and isolation are represented in material terms by their 'disconnection' from networks, as in the case of those who have to move away from traumatic or harmful settings (refugees, those affected by abuse or other 'breakdowns' in their lives, for example). Clearly, if we accept that access to and involvement in networks are assuming of particular significance currently, then the impacts of this kind of dislocation will become all the more problematic, especially in relation to the problem of identity and achieving a strong positive sense of self (Castells, 2004, p. 6).

Power, Networks and Social Work: What are the Implications?

In light of the preceding discussion, the challenges for social work are thus two-fold. Firstly, it is important to develop an understanding of what the structures and dynamics of the 'network society'

might mean for practice. And secondly, on the basis of this analysis, to develop strategies and techniques for 'effective' interventions in the interests of people who use services.

Social workers, for instance, will need to develop an appreciation of their own position and the power relationships associated with the place they hold, or are assigned to, within their networks; whilst they must be similarly aware that those with whom they engage in practice are similarly 'networked', or, in some cases disconnected. This is an important starting point, given that as practitioners we inevitably project impressions and meanings, communicating images of authority and competence (in both senses) and acting as sources of legitimacy by virtue of the place we hold in organisational, structural and legislative terms.

Likewise, though, those who 'use' services are acting from a position within their own web of relationships, accountabilities, expectations and mutual understandings. Castells (2007) introduces the concept of 'mass self-communication' to elaborate the contemporary nature of the dynamics of culture, identity and self-expression within the 'network society'. This is not a process which is detached from networks or network power, but it is rather a particular and inevitable element of their outputs. Mass self-communication bears some similarity to Giddens' (1992) notion of the self in modern (late modern/postmodern) societies, as something which is structured, but self-authored, and constantly re-constructed as part of a reflexive process of generating and acting on new and updated knowledge about the self. The availability and increasing use of new media and more sophisticated technologies is an essential aspect of this process, as it facilitates and speeds up individuals' capacity to renew and modify their personalised narratives of themselves and their relationships. Indeed, more than simply 'speeding up' communicative processes, this could be viewed as one aspect of the transformation suggested by Castells himself. As he would have it, this is by now, the new norm for the construction, organisation and renegotiation of human relationships. Powerful narratives of self and identity projects are capable of emerging with great rapidity and intensity, but of subsiding or shifting into something else equally rapidly. On the other hand, these 'surface' flows and counterflows are equally capable of obscuring or misrepresenting the deeper currents and formations which remain of central significance in shaping the social terrain. Thus, our understanding of networks and their deeper structures enables us to move beyond a purely 'postmodern' take on the fragmentation, atomisation and essential instability of personal identities and narratives and to appreciate the necessary relationship between increasing levels of traffic at one level and the embedded power of networks at another. For example, those whose lives are disrupted and disorganised may experience the cumulative impact of exclusion from key social networks, and the negative consequences of being problematised and categorised by these very

networks, as in the case of asylum seekers, say. For social work in theory and practice, the challenge is to hold this relationship in mind, even as we attempt to deal with increasing levels of communication and ever growing information mountains in the day-to-day.

The Challenges for Social Work

All of the changes outlined above present potential challenges for social work, especially as their interaction is a further destabilising dynamic, which cumulatively increases the likelihood of breakdown and dysfunction in people's lives. These developing trends have been articulated clearly by Dominelli (2010), in her discussions of the impacts of the 'globalising' influences and dynamics which impact on both their lived experiences and the organisation and practices of intervention with people and groups which are discriminated against and marginalised.

1). Problematic interfaces between the individual and the social

The reference points which enable us to understand how we should act, and how we can establish shared meanings become much more uncertain in a context of global change, and this is reflected in increasing potential for fractures to develop at the point where the individual is inserted into the social, or where there is an increasing disjuncture between the two; that is, where personal characteristics and attitudes encounter the potentially very different norms and expectations of a new or changed social environment. This effect is to some extent redolent of the Durkheimian concept of 'anomie'. Changing relationships between young people and the community, and the prevailing pre-occupation with anti-social behaviour represent a clear example of this kind of tension, operating at the interface between different 'networks' (Squires, 2008).

2). Dealing with uncertainty and loss

Social work as a form of practice can expect to engage frequently in situations of disruption in people's lives, but as these multiply and become overlaid with wider levels of complexity and challenge, the task of anticipating and preparing to respond becomes more challenging. Appreciating the many dimensions of 'loss' now requires an awareness of distant trauma, upheaval and problematic relocation, for example (Smith, 2008, p. 79).

3). Working with the dynamics of power, inequality and oppression

Social work is no stranger to the issues of discrimination and the requirements of anti-oppressive practice, of course, but the global nature of social change and realignment has had a substantial

impact on the task of challenging inequality, victimisation and mistreatment. We are increasingly faced with new and unhelpful stereotypes of whole groups which quickly become pervasively influential, just as we are forced to deal with the implications of 'networked' stereotypes of ourselves as social workers (Kitzinger, 2004).

4). Managing complexity and 'difference'

There is therefore a need to be attuned to 'difference', and the need to negotiate it from one's own perspective, but also to understand the implications of this from the point of view of people who use services. In very practical terms, for example, the necessity of working in different languages becomes more demanding as these become more diversified. Knowing how to communicate is not just a matter of language, but also depends on being able to develop a basis for mutual understanding and expectations. As we shall see, this raises the possibility of social work claiming an active role in 'network-making' (Castells, 2009).

Negotiating Networks and Power

Social work has to address the material questions of the nature of power and power relationships in order to achieve its goals, as I have argued previously (Smith, 2008), so how does Castells' analysis signpost us towards additional means by which to undertake this task. Perhaps we can exemplify this initially by reference to oppressed or excluded groups, such as travellers, or young people from care. In these instances, the problems represented by 'network power' for those on the outside are starkly real. Not only are these groups likely to be excluded from socially-approved networks which provide access to opportunities and resources, but their own capacity to form alternatives is likely to be inhibited by lack of or restricted access to the technological capacity to enable them to 'make' their own networks (Valentine et al, 2005; Citizens Online and National Centre for Social Research, 2008). In addition, it is suggested, the 'digital divide' itself is being superseded by an 'information divide', which itself is an important contributing factor in social exclusion (Steyaert and Gould, 2009, p. 747).

At the same time, these exclusionary pressures are intensified to the extent that 'networked power' operates to confer a sense of consensus and legitimacy to the knowledge conventionally held about members of outsider groups, and its uses (McAra and McVie, 2005). It appears to be relatively easy, for example, to tap into that consistent vein of shared understanding that young people are

problematic *per se*, as has most recently been demonstrated by concerns about their involvement in the 2011 'riots' and the associated construction of their involvement by media and politicians (Pitts, 2011).

So, what does this analysis require of us as participants in the 'social work project'? Key attributes and approaches might be summarised in the following terms: a critical perspective; a capacity to 'make connections'; recognition of our role as 'switchers'; and a capacity to deal creatively with uncertainty and change. Utilising Castells' typology of power to influence change in the interests of people who use and are affected by social work interventions appears to require the application of these capabilities if we are to be effective.

Thus, in reflecting on 'network power', its implications for practice, we might wish to consider the pervasive impact of 'systems', exemplified recently by the Integrated Children's System (White et al, 2009). Although this was a highly controversial innovation in children's social work, and one which has been contested and resisted, it is also representative of wider 'technologising' trends (Garrett, 2005; West and Heath, 2011). Its development and influence are indicative of a way of thinking which has achieved a degree of dominance in the organisation and delivery of services:

> The intention is that the ICS will provide local authorities in England and Wales with a comprehensive system for collecting information about children in need who are in receipt of service by providing a single approach to undertaking the processes of assessment, planning, intervention and reviewing. Key aspects are that it should be understandable to the children and families and informed by them, that it should improve multi-agency working and that it should be implemented in electronic format. The records... should support management in monitoring children's progress over time, demonstrate how a single entry system would operate and provide data for corporate planning locally and national statistical returns. (Mitchell and Sloper, 2008, p. 1)

Thus, a unified system for gathering, collating and using information would be developed which would convey common meanings to all involved, including 'children and families', whilst also providing the basis for individualised decision-making, corporate planning and national statistical information. The 'system' adumbrated by this model could therefore be expected to play a determinant role in organising not just the means by which information is collected and used, but also its form, and crucially its 'weight' and meaning. Thus, what might appear as an essentially 'technological' mechanism can also be shown to have a 'social' dimension, to the extent that it is the outward manifestation of a process which determines who are the 'objects of concern', what

questions should be asked about them, how responses are classified, and consequently how they come to be problematised (or not). Once information becomes recorded and authenticated under ICS, it would seem that the space for the articulation of counter narratives might be significantly curtailed.

On the other hand, the subsequent questioning and challenge directed towards ICS may be indicative of more than just a lack of functionality; it may also be the focal point for a form of 'resistance', which may or may not be 'networked' (Castells, 2011, p. 779). Thus, the paradoxical outcome of a prevailing reliance on systems developed under the ICS umbrella, set in a real world context of adaptive and variable local ('street level'; Lipsky, 1980) responses, may be a predictable, yet complex and contradictory development, in the form of direct and indirect challenge; and the assertion of alternative, less regulated forms of knowledge (Community Care, 17th May 2011).

Network power (and resistance) can also be found to operate in other spheres of intervention, too, such as where the 'medical model' establishes the criteria by which assessments and 'treatments' are to be judged in human services, setting 'the rules of inclusion' (Castells, 2011, p. 773) and the basis for the attribution of expertise and authority to intervene.

Networking power is distinguishable from network power to the extent that it is revealed in active human processes of knowledge organisation and inclusion/exclusion. It may be apparent in the social work context in the processes by which some groups and individuals, notably those who receive/use services, are excluded from information sharing or decision-making forums:

> "The problem is, when you are ill, people don't keep you informed... and they withhold information from you. This is not the right time to withhold information as you can't decide things like medication if you don't understand all the facts, therefore you are left with no choices" (Mental Health Service User, quoted in Mental Health Foundation, 2008, p. 1)

Once again, the process of exclusion might not be intentional or explicit, but it develops a rationale of its own. Failure to involve someone in the first instance may be habit-forming and may serve, in itself, as justification for continued lack of consultation over time. People may come to be viewed as incapable of determining their own 'best interests', for example, and instead their capacity to influence decisions is subsumed under the collective judgements of professional alliances (MacDonald, 2010).

Networked power in a social work context is identifiable in terms of the capacity to communicate and share information easily, and in this sense can also be associated with the contemporary

development of increasingly sophisticated forms of ICT, to which people may well have differential levels of access, and in relation to which their operational skills may also vary. In this sense, Castells' analysis is particularly pertinent, to the extent that it is reasonable to think of networked communities, often virtual, which sustain invisible and impermeable barriers between those 'in the know' and those on the outside, who don't know, don't know what they don't know, and don't know what they need to know (see Moriarty et al, 2007). To the extent that these communication channels also act to confer legitimacy on their users, the network once again operates to determine what counts as knowledge, who is entitled to it, and on what basis it can be shared or used.

For social work practitioners and service users, though, there is another dimension to networked power, outside of the ambit of the state and its agencies, and this takes the form of the networks and communities to which they belong, or from which they are excluded as citizens, which may be of greater significance and impact in their lives. Young people who are Travellers thus find themselves doubly frozen out, to the extent that formal networks and agencies do not recognise their presence, whilst their communities of origin are reluctant to readmit them (Allen, 2011). Identity itself becomes a matter to be determined by and through the power of networks, therefore. Clearly, multiple exclusions of this nature pose very substantial problems for many of those who are the subject of social work interventions, and for whom questions of empowerment, identity and belonging lie at the heart of the problems they face (Castells, 2004, p. 9).

It is in the face of this sort of manifestation of power relations that Castells' fourth category 'network-making power' offers alternative possibilities, and a degree of hope for those who are effectively disenfranchised in different ways through the operation of established and legitimised forms of networking. This, he defines as 'the power to program specific networks according to the interests and values of the programmers, and the power to switch different networks following the strategic alliances between the dominant actors of various networks' (Castells, 2011, p. 733). Drawing on the language of ICT, Castells views 'switchers' and 'programmers' as critical actors in the negotiation, maintenance and reordering of power relations. Programmers can determine the organisation and processes of networks, whilst switchers play a crucial strategic role in influencing changes in the relationships within and between networks. For social work, then, adopting these roles appears to offer the possibility of securing change with and on behalf of those who are marginalized and denied access to power in their lives (for promoting and supporting the development of 'resistance identities', in Castells' terms; 2004, p. 8). If we accept the argument that networks are themselves the dominant means by which social structures and relationships are

organised, then it becomes equally important that practitioners see their 'network-making' activities as central to the task of achieving positive change.

'Network-making' in Practice

Bolzan and Gale (2011) have recently reported an example which may help to illustrate the effectiveness of this kind of practice, utilising the notion of 'interrupted spaces' to demonstrate how opportunities for change may be created. Recognising the centrality and value of 'connectedness' in promoting resilience (p.3), they undertook first to introduce a ''circuit breaker' to the everyday lives of young people who were experiencing multiple disadvantage' (p. 5), with the aim of creating space for them to establish effective networks of their own, which would generate both mutual support and potentialities. The practitioners involved could be regarded as acting as 'switchers', in Castells' terms, interrupting established processes of exclusion and thereby enabling the young people concerned to act as their own 'programmers', setting their own agenda for achieving their own objectives in relation to the wider community. Importantly, the networks established in their own right by these young people became the focal point for re-engagement with other collective interests:

> It became apparent that the communities in which these projects sat were eager to respond to the young people in ways which were both celebratory of their achievements and also about attempting to make changes which could further accommodate this previously marginalized group. It was as if the community of adults wanted to find a way to connect with this group but had not been able to do so. (Bolzan and Gale, 2011, p. 10)

The authors conclude that the 'interrupted spaces' approach was crucial to establishing a context in which young people without conventional and accepted links with their community 'could access power resources previously unavailable to them' (p. 12), which included the capacity to take control and generate their own sources of 'network power'.

Critical reflections: networks, power and social work

We might conclude from the preceding discussion that in a 'network society', social work practitioners must be willing to understand, engage with, question and challenge the power relations and dynamics which infuse all aspects of social life, and which underpin the processes of marginalisation and exclusion experienced by particular groups and individuals. On the other hand, it

is also important to pause for a moment to consider some of the potential criticisms which might arise.

Firstly, as with systems theory in the past (see Forder, 1976), there may be a tendency to view networks as rather more monolithic, deterministic and impermeable than is the case in practice. Given that people are likely to be engaged in or affected by more than one network, the very complexity of interactions and relationships may be underestimated, especially in an era of what Castells (2009) himself describes as 'mass self-communication', that is to say, more and faster forms of social exchange and realignment.

Secondly, it seems that several different understandings of power are conflated in Castells' analysis. It is either the 'capacity' to influence other people through forms of domination (Castells, 2009, p. 10); or, it seems, it is represented by more impersonal constitutive 'mechanisms' characteristic of the network society (p. 47), redolent, perhaps, of Foucault's (1979) characterisation of the machinery of surveillance and control. So, when he introduces the notion of resistance and 'counterpower' (2011, p. 1), it is difficult to see how this originates, and how it can operate other than to replace one form of domination with another. Fuchs (2009, p. 95) argues instead that it is 'not coercive power, but ...cooperation [that] is the most fundamental process in society'.

And, thirdly, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether Castells' transformational view of the network society is one which is fundamentally shaped and driven by the rapid and massive recent development of contemporary forms of mass media and communication technologies, or whether we should be thinking more in terms of a particular era of social development and change, of which our creation and use of 'networks' is symptomatic rather than causal. In this sense, power relations are articulated and shaped through networks, but they do not originate within them. The sources and dynamics of power derive from elsewhere, in established structures and social relationships, characterised by inequality, dominance and control. As Stadler observes, one of the consequences of this ambiguity is that 'Castells' analysis of power' is problematic both in terms of the definitions he applies and in empirical terms 'where he does not specify sufficiently who holds it or how it operates. Yet this is not an irresolvable problem.... What we need is an adapted notion of power that integrates notions of design and emergence' (Stadler, 2006, p. 192).

For social work, however, this sense of ambiguity may in fact be helpful. It is important to retain a sense of agency and potentiality if we are to aspire to change social relationships which are disempowering and harmful to those with whose interests we identify. It is equally important to gain a sense of the 'operating environment', and the impact of contemporary developments such as the

new dynamics of power flowing through social and technological networks. How these impact on people, and how we might utilise the same methods and strategies to secure change are two sides of the same coin; and thus, a 'reflexive' understanding of a complex material reality is the necessary precursor to change, as the example cited above (Bolzan and Gale, 2011) demonstrates:

> What differentiates human societies from natural systems is their ability to affect, more or less deliberately, the rules of the game. (Stadler, 2006, p. 192)

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