

# **Discourses of power: comparing Castells and Negri on global networks of power**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the work of two different theorists who attempt to account for the distribution power in the context of a planet that is covered by a multiplicity of communication networks. Manuel Castells' systematic description of power within technological networks is predicated in an observational method, and is geared towards examining the relationships both within, between, and outside of differing sets of networks of various sorts. Antonio Negri, on the other hand, poses a framework for understanding power that is metaphysical and ever-present in reality. Drawn from the philosophical works of Machiavelli and Spinoza, Negri's formulation of power specifically stages a tension between authority and autonomy that opens the space for technological and institutional revolution beyond the constraints of extant society. Both thinkers provide accounts of the transmission of control within networks, and both cite their reliance on Foucault in their respective formulations of power (Castells, 2009: 10-11; Negri, 1999: 27-28; Hardt and Negri, 2000: 22-28). Yet neither author engages much with the work of the other beyond a brief mention to Castells in *Empire*. The volume of the work of Castells and Negri is significant, and so far these authors have not been substantially compared to date. As such, this paper seeks only to address the key conceptual elements, and will discuss the key systems of deployment in the context of media and communications studies.

Dealing with the distribution of power throughout networks has been a mainstay of continental political philosophy over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Indeed, French political philosophy, as most recognised in Deleuze and Foucault, charts the beginnings of the hegemony of network power in the post-war period. This paper will thus commence with the analysis at this point, as it acts as the point of departure between Castells and Negri; a discussion of each thinker's concepts of power will follow, then the paper will conclude with an assessment of the relative political value of each framework. It should be noted that, while much of Negri's work since the early 1990s has been performed with Michael Hardt, the analysis of power that I will be discussing is predicated in a strand of inquiry that Negri has been engaged with at least since 1981's *The Savage Anomaly*.

## Foucault and media studies

Foucault repeatedly states that power already operates using the logic of the network. In *Discipline and Punish*, he states that power operates using a wide variety of practices which “one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension” - individuals express power as a relationship, and within which power “is transmitted by them and through them [...] they are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation.” Finally he states that power is not a thing definitively ‘acquired’ by the control or destruction of one dispositif or another, but rather that power is expressed through the influence of a local event on “the entire network in which it is caught up” (Foucault, M., 1977: 26-27). In a lecture a year later Foucault clarifies his position: “when I say that power establishes a network through which it freely circulates, this is true only up to a certain point”. For Foucault, the goal of any analysis of power is not to understand ‘who’ or ‘what’ exerts control, but the processes of how power is deployed and through what mechanisms. “It is only if we grasp these techniques of power and demonstrate the economic advantages or political utility that derives from them in a given context for specific reasons, that we can understand how these mechanisms come to be effectively incorporated into the social whole” (Foucault, M., 1980: 99-101). With Foucault already pointing to power as reliant on network structures, the contest for a concept of power becomes not a case of *if* power is networked, but rather *how* it is networked. The context of the disciplinary structures of power is spatially simple: Foucault (1977: 126) notes that ‘disciplinary monotony’ requires enclosure and isolation. For both Castells and Negri, the concern over networks of power is due to a shared belief that these networks no longer face inwards as in the institutions of the disciplinary society, but rather that they face outwards onto the global stage, constituting a global economy of power.

Castells and Negri have made contributions to Foucault’s formulation of power in a much more recent context, but both have diverted from Foucault in several key ways. Castells attempts to structure an understanding of how power is organised in the network society - that is how power is segmented into different bodies, and how those bodies operate in relation to each other. In this sense, he has produced an idea of relational power that attempts to apply the logic of networks onto the networked society itself, by interrogating, if you will, the distribution of effects within a global network of networks. Negri, on the other hand, operates from the other direction.

Foucault’s work on identifying the institutionalised nature of discipline is important, as it locates the departure point from the previous logic of disciplinary power into the new logics of networked

systems of power. In particular, Deleuze's (1992) essay "Postscript on the societies of control" has been a formative discussion point on the transition from the disciplinary society to the mapping of the society of control onto the network society, and it is through this window that we can see the distinction between Castells' network society and Negri's Empire. While Deleuze's understanding of the society of control differs from Castells' concept of the network society, there is a definite affinity between these two systems. The difference can be seen in Lash's reading of the network society, which historicises the network society as a development designed to manage risk - as he says, it "puts order into the previous disorder of disorganized capitalism", to which the network society represents the managing of the disparate economies of the globe into a shared economic condition which sublates the existing order of any individual economy into a logic of networks (Lash, 2002: 126-127). Lash reads Empire, on the other hand, as a concept that describes the networks of global governance as a system of authority that attempts to capture new economic conditions as they are produced by the citizens of the world under its normative logic of politics (Lash, 2002: 209). Empire is thus a model of capture, and not a model of cohesion (such that all existing networks already operate in a shared and centralised logic).

In attempting to structure what they believe is an accurate model of power, these thinkers also produce different formulations of how power and authority operate in a society governed by networks, and whether a new politics is possible. What is at stake between these discourses is an analytic for resistance, each formulation having different political tendencies and frames of resistance, and also bounds on what they consider possible.

Media and communications theories are integral to the understanding of these two perspectives on power. Although Negri seems to be largely agnostic towards the involvement of communications technologies in the processes of globalisation, a reading of his work from the perspective of media studies sees technological platforms of media at the heart of many of his contentions. Indeed Negri at times shifts between a favour for older theories of communication that are less relevant to contemporary media discourses, the production of new theories which have been roundly criticised (see "incommunicability" in Hardt and Negri, 2000: 56), or else expressing his own discontent with how to articulate the new conditions of communication (Negri, 2007). Castells is far more explicit on the dependence of media in his concept of the network society, to the point where media 'reads onto' the issues of many other areas. He retains the discourses of media studies when he refers to the issues of platforms, gatekeeping, and protocols even in the context of other types of networks, such as the managerial structure of large corporations - something that Fuchs criticises as a

problematic act of synecdoche that misplaces a part of society (technology) onto the whole (Fuchs, 2009: 96). I believe that Castells' work opens up a great deal of interrogative capacity for discussing the political conditions within networked relations of power, particularly within the frame of media studies, but at the expense of properly formulating this beyond the bounds of the technological. On top of this, his work also shows the capacity for networks to act beyond their own borders, and he theorises the space for a given institution to have effects on another - which are important aspects for addressing the relationship between institutions and individuals outside those institutions.

### **Castells' observations on power**

Castells' definition of power is simple: the relational capacity for an actor to asymmetrically influence the decisions of other social actors, where an actor is understood to be any "individuals, collectives, organizations, institutions and networks" (Castell, 2009: 10). As a general claim approaching a definition, Castells considers power to operate on two registers: the physical techniques of "coercion and intimidation", and the psychic technique of "the construction of meaning" (Castells, 2012: 5). It is violence upon the body, and violence upon thought. It is worth noting that coercion and intimidation are essentially secondary methods of power, which will only achieve something if the victim has the terms communicated to them under which the threats or violence will end; Castells does not provide an analysis of the real conditions of the power of bodily destruction, something that is far more resonant in terms of a network in Mbembe's (2003, 25-30) concept of 'necropower'. In real terms, Castells is discussing the capacity to have access to the military or militias, police or security services, mercenaries or patriots; all of which are real and existing concerns in a global model of power, but all of which find their origins in the psychic development of meaning. Meaning appears as the preferred form of power, as it is "more decisive and more stable" and is "the most fundamental process in society" (Castells, 2012: 5; 2009: 10). Counter-power is also theorised by Castells (2007: 239), as a concept that exposes "the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized". A problem here is that the distinction between power and counter-power leaves a gap between thought and action. While power is expressed as a purely mental construct over the actions of others, the terms of the full terror of the state upon the body of the oppressed is excluded from such a dynamic.

In his book, *Communication Power*, Castells (2009: 416) frames his conception of power in the network society as "primarily exercised by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication enacted in global/local multimedia networks of mass communication,

including mass self-communication". The environment of communication defines where the limits of interpretation lie, and because the networks of communication are so broad and global there is no longer a geographic or temporal space that lies outside these limits. The tensions between power and counter-power are, for Castells, to be found at the site of the production of meaning - and within the network society, this site is not necessarily the owners of the means of communication. In modes of communication with a centralised ownership dynamic there is little effective difference between the owner of media content and the owner of media distribution, but in the phase of media production that is characterised by networks of producers the control over content no longer appears in an oligarchic form. The space for the production of meaning is given over to any and all nodes in the network society, and these nodes are equally capable of redistributing any new structures of meaning.

This concept of power is one that Castells presents as having four specific expressions within the context of the network society that define the operations between actors and networks. Castells' four expressions of power are networked power, network power, networking power, and network-making power; which Castells charts neatly in the final chapter of *Communication Power* (2009, 416-432). The first two expressions are internal expressions of power. Networked power and network power both describe the relationships of power that exist within a system of operations. Networked power is the ability for one actor within a system to asymmetrically influence others within the same network. This represents the coding of the interplay of influences between actors operating on the basis of the same series of rules. Network power is the effect of the protocol of a network on the behaviour and communication that occurs within the bounds of the network. Individuals who wish to operate through a platform or institute will have to do so in the terms of the network's conditions of operation. While this may be a simple case of subjecting oneself to the protocols of a network of communication, it may also mean the capacity to exploit others within the network. Understanding and exploiting the protocols of a network will allow for an asymmetric influence on other actors within the network, which meets Castells' definition of power. Conceptually, this idea is not particular to communication networks, and the communication metaphor is equally deployable across many other social conditions. Castells gives the example of globalisation, as it expresses a specific set of social protocols which are deployed through politics and markets and which allow for the coordination of multiple actors across the globe. The network and networked powers describe the effects within a particular field of play that is independent of other interactions (Castells, 2011: 774-775). The ability for these two forms of power to provide the capacity for resistance is meagre - networked power identifies the site of power in a network, but

resistance could only be represented as the emergence of a new site of power or the relative reduction in power; network power changes in relation to resistance, but the resistance itself occurs elsewhere. The space for resistance to appear is only in terms of the ability for actors to reproduce the conditions of power within the network, perhaps under different terms, but nonetheless the analysis can only operate within the bounds of a singular network for inquiry.

The other two forms of power that Castells discusses are more interesting: networking power and network-making power. Networking power is the capacity of institutionalised power of a network to influence events beyond itself. The combined effects of social organisation that is afforded by a network can turn a social network of actors into an apparatus that influences the behaviour of other actors, without incorporating them into the terms of the network's behaviour. This concept allows for a model of a network exerting power on individuals, without those individuals formally comprising the network; that is to say, how individuals are influenced by a network, while still excluded from being directly subject to the internal workings of the codes and protocols of the system. This power is primarily expressed through a process of 'gatekeeping' which determines who is included and excluded from the network; in terms of power this determines who is treated as a node in a reciprocal relationship with other nodes in a network, and who is not granted the privilege of access (Castells, 2009: 43). This means that the network can have influences on other forms of social structure that might not necessarily be networks. That said, between Castells and Foucault there is not exactly much space in the way of social structures that are not networks, but nonetheless there is conceptual space for the interaction with other concepts of social structure. Networking power is the primary method through which power is enacted on the world by a network, as it is the network that consolidates power. As Castells (2009:45) states, "in many instances the power holders are networks themselves". It is with and through networks that power is expressed in the world.

Network-making power is the capacity to include new actors into a network, and to exert the effects of the network's extant protocol and power relationships upon them. This form of power has two methodologies. The first is the place of the 'switchers'. Switchers police the barrier between inside and outside the network. While these are usually individuals who are implicated in the power structure of the network, and essentially a form of apparatus for the control of the network, their place can be more disruptively located - for instance in the place of actors external to the network who utilise external methods to force their adoption into the network, in a manner that both reshapes the protocols and the balance of power in the network (Castells, 2009: 46-7). The second is

the abstract methods deployed by the meta-programmers - these are those who determine the architectural structure of the network that is produced by programmers, and define the terms under which the code and protocols of the network are structured (Castells, 2009; 420; Castells, 2011: 781). In many cases, they define the mandate of inclusion/exclusion that the switchers either police or contest. Through their manipulation of switchers and programmers, the meta-programmers predominantly determine "*network-making power*, the paramount form of *power in the network society*" (Castells, 2009: 47, emphasis in text). These decisions are made external to the network, and thus the role played by network-making power is analogous to the role of a sovereign in the total transcendent separation of the meta-programmer from the protocol of the network. Certainly these actors could be considered to be subject to the 'code' of the network, in the sense that a communicative medium will have certain limits as to what possible protocols they can express; however, these individuals determine even from the outset which medium or platform the network will exist on. Castells (2011: 781) states, "they are those who, in the last resort, decide the content and format of communication according to the formula that will best accomplish the goals they assign to the network". The notion of a sovereign (which we will return to with Negri) is traditionally rendered in two formats, both of which have their application: "Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception", claims Carl Schmitt (2006: 5); while Foucault (1978: 136) places the sovereign as 'he' who has the "power of life and death", however that right may be expressed. Both these representations operate to describe the role of the meta-programmer in terms of the population of the network. Death should be understood to be a metaphorical case, but the notion of 'let live and let die' has profound ramifications in terms of the existence of Facebook profiles, which can exist long after the end of the life of an individual, and will continue to constitute a node of connected individuals for data mining into the future.

Resistance to power is a fundamental necessity in any analysis of power. As already defined, Castells formulates resistance as 'counter-power', which appears in different forms under different expressions of power. The crucial thing to remember about networked and network powers, in the context of an analysis with Negri, is that the concern of power for Castells is the capacity of various aspects of the network to influence actors in and outside the network, but the network is only formed externally and transcendentally to the network itself (Castells, 2009: 45). Resistance to the processes of networking and network-making power primarily exists in the form of resistance to being included in the network in the first place ("blocking the switches" - 2009, 48), or by reprogramming the conditions of the network. The first instance shares a great deal in common with the workerist methodology of 'the strategy of refusal' (Tronti, 2007), but in Castells' own paradigm,

exclusion from the networks of power is exponentially more costly than simply being directly subject to them (Castells, 2011: 774). One should also identify that the role played by the programmers and switchers is not necessarily neutral, and these roles are ones that can subvert the operations of the network. Furthermore, in Castells' interpretation of counter-power, while an individual network is dominated by network-making power, those self-same actors in turn are constituted in some networked arrangement which has some form of non-neutral set of power relationships within it. Indeed, there is nothing that stops those who act as meta-programmers from also being cast as subjects of the network at other times. The nature of meta-programming is simply a perspective on the deployment of effects on the network by means that are external to the network.

The strength of Castells' concepts is that power is not simply something that exists within a given network, but has effects on the way the network relates to things external to itself, including other networks. Furthermore, the conditions of power are cast as flexibly structured, open to changes in protocol and relationships to other networks, and are variably constituted by actors or networks of actors. Through their relationships of interaction individual systems move towards constituting the network society. The full extent of his observational approach to the problem of power and resistance can be read in his extensive, but certainly not problem-free, account of the agglomeration of global political dissent in the period from December 2009 to November 2011 that is recorded in *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Castells, 2012).

Castells' approach to power is transcendental, as it applies a structural logic to the conditions of power in the network society prior to any need to understand that power, or the effects of that power beyond its relation to the network. What is lacking in Castells' concept is a basis in being. The relationship of power to individuals is discussed, but the relationship between communication and being in the world is only ever approached in terms of their effects on the transcendental network society, and never on the level of the body.

### **Negri's ontological concepts of power**

Where Castells provides us with four expressions of power founded on a singular concept, Negri's typology of power is a tripartite ontology: constituent power, constituted power, and sovereignty. Negri's perspective is very much a case of privileging beings, rather than institutions, as the locus of power, and the idea is tied to a three-decade project dedicated to philosophising the process for



developing a society past our present global/capital/exploitation paradigm - a paradigm he and Michael Hardt have labelled 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xi).

Negri's vision of power is invested through and through with the concept of the multitude: the sum total of all possible subjectivities and identities of univocal being; an open set of social singularities (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 111). It is a political notion of being, which could be defined as all such individuals that exist, such that none are excluded. The multitude is the agent of history and the active force that exists in the world: any form of power must express itself on the multitude in order to produce action. This is a notion that is global, and has always existed in potential, but rarely in actuality. As soon as individuals are subject to the processes of representation, segregation, and isolation, they are incapable of expressing the full vibrancy of social being that constitutes the multitude, or so Negri claims (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 60-63). The multitude is innately resistant of the capacities of Empire, and indeed Negri defines resistance to oppression as existing prior to the expression of power (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 63-65). The inversion of this model of power comes from the fact that the self-organising power of the multitude must first be overcome by Empire in order to organise it towards whatever goal. This self-organising aspect of the multitude resists the impositions of external authority before that authority can subject individuals to its whims. Negri's theses clearly prioritise the material aspects of being, and he advocates at multiple times for a political ontology that is innately democratic (Negri, 1999: 61-80).

Negri's idea of constituent power is power in its pure potency. This is power that is inseparable from its actuality in the world. The state of being in the world is the state of possessing constituent power. This is not something that is qualified by a mind/body duality, where the body supersedes the mind, or that constituent power is a purely bodily thing, but rather a case where the individual expresses constituent power in the extension into the world through both action and intellect. In this, Negri is mirroring Spinoza's analysis of God/Nature, wherein he identifies physical action and thought as operating on the same immanent plane. There is no distinction between the reality of thought and the reality of objects - both have a place within being. Because of this, to some extent, the role of specific systems themselves are never considered to the depth that Castells attempts, which I would suggest occurs for two reasons. Firstly, Negri sees all institutions as expressing largely the same set of characteristics when it comes to oppression: a reduction of individual capacity to act (but never its removal), a corruption of self-identification, and the expropriation of material and immaterial production (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 77; 2000: 201-204; 2004: 333-336). Secondly, the particular frames of resistance to constituted power are best engaged by locally-determined

practices that are not governed by an academic elite. This is to say that the individual expressions of constituted power are incidental, and are best undone by individuals who are local to the site of power.

From these localised resistances, new politics may be able to flourish. Resistance and power are in tension, but this does not adequately describe the conditions for new political emergences. Negri speaks variously of a counter-power and an alterpower, which ties a form of resistance to a form of insurrection, and then to the emergence of a new potential power (Negri, 2008: 139-140).

Resistance is not classed as a thing that simply is 'against' power, but is a staging ground for a new political future.

The separation between constituent power and constituted power is a separation between the power of individuals and the power of institutions and authority, and it is not reducible to a simple equation of asymmetries of power (Negri, 2008: 110). It is instead the case where constituted power channels constituent power, through the "subordination of the multiplicity, of the mind, of freedom"; this tension between constituent and constituted power can be further represented as the "conceivability of producing things" versus the force that actually produces them (Negri, 1991: 190-191). Constituted power would be best thought of not as authority in itself, but as a false sensibility of rules that are laid down over the pre-existing rules of physical reality. Constituted power, in this sense, is organisation power, which rules over the arrangement of objects and things in the world. As such, it does not operate on the same plane as constituent power, which is a wholly immanent ecology of practices and things that is only beholden to the physical laws of reality.

Sovereignty, in the field of Negri's theories, operates as the *suprema potestas* - which is to say the supreme institution of constituted power (Negri, 1999: 13). It is the power that determines other powers, and is the total site for the contestation of new political frames. In antiquity this role was given to the monarch, or the forum, or, euphemistically, 'the prince'. The case in modern sovereignty was that this role was no longer fulfilled by a monarch, but by a state power. Foucault (1980: 121) notes this displacement of sovereignty as simply a process of shifting the "king's head" from a hereditary ruler to an elected one without fundamentally changing the relationship of the sovereign to the people. For Negri, the place of sovereignty has been shifted from the local political frame of the nation state to the level of the globe. What acts as the supreme power of sovereignty in any localised situation is the full force of the totality of political globalisation - a form of globalisation that is, crucially, networked. What this means is that there is no longer a singular locus for

sovereignty, and by no means does this new form of sovereignty simply apply the logics of state sovereignty on the global stage. The king's head has been chopped off, but sovereignty remains as a multiplicity of independent nodes that individually impact on certain events. For Negri this means that sovereignty has been made open to reclamation by the multitude. This, Negri believes, provides a means for alter/counter-power to stage a new political future, and regain control over constituted power past the structures of capitalism, Empire, and the prejudicial frames of sexism and colonialism. As Hardt and Negri (2009, 372-373) close with in *Commonwealth*, "Our inclination is to appropriate this concept of governance, subvert its imperial vocation, and reformulate it as a concept of democracy and revolution". The challenge for this analytical regime will be not to drive home a prescriptive antidote to Empire, but rather to open up the recognition of similarity between struggles on the face of the globe.

## **Conclusion**

Antonio Negri and Manuel Castells share core similarities in their treatment of political power - both see contemporary society as fundamentally structured as a network, and both see this network as instrumental in the development and distribution of systems of power. Both scholars attempt a grand vision of the operations of power in a society dominated by networks, but where Negri is overly general in terms of the nature of this oppression, Castells becomes exceedingly specific. Castells primarily identifies the effects of the power of a network from the perspective of the network; individuals are assumed to be under the influence of the network whenever they engage with it, which is different from being incorporated into the network as if they were informational bits in a data stream. Furthermore, while elements of a network may be rendered in terms of a language of computer programming, networks that do not operate in terms of the logic of computers (for instance, language) may change their protocol much more rapidly than the more stable vision of networks that Castells provides. Resistance, in this frame, operates to be able to stage new terms for the network to operate under, and allows for the decentralisation of authorial power across a network, but never gives up on the sovereignty of the network and the network-makers themselves. Negri on the other hand leaves an analytic that has the potential to address a great many situations, but deals with most engagements between individuals and institutions in a manner that desires the production of new political spaces, and does not address the abjectly exploited (and in fact grants them a level of agency that seems to ignore the effects of malnutrition and deprivation on the body - see *Commonwealth*, 2009: 39-55).

Technological determinism and excessive romanticism do seem to share core principles, however. For one, both perspectives allow for a reading of sovereignty as something able to be reclaimed without a bloody and protracted revolution; the distinction then becomes a case of what possibilities stem from the different analyses of power. At the core of the dissimilarities between Negri and Castells is the politics of the present. Castells is only ever capable of formulating a reformist approach to the conditions of institutionalised power - as Fuchs identifies in his critique of *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Fuchs, 2012).

There are a great number of similarities between Negri and Castells in terms of their suggestions for solutions. For instance, the call for a greater degree of self-representation, and a reduction in representative politics, is made by both authors at various points as a means of both escaping the disjunctive synthesis of parliamentary politics and also staging the frame for the capacity for self-determination and expression (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 104; Hardt and Negri, 2004: 247; Castells, 2009: 55; Castells, 2012: 232).

In the context of the claims made by Fuchs and Foucault, the work on power provided by Castells provides a limited reformist program for political change, and so too will any analysis that follows in his footsteps. Negri, on the other hand, provides a toolkit that appears to unlock all doors, but at the expense of talking in generalities so large that they fail to provide a systematic analytic for use in case studies. Negri may provide us with a greater capacity to recognise our own capacities at individual moments, but, since departing from his more prescriptive political analyses prior to the 1980s, his concepts have lost some of their incisiveness in their capacity to stage interventionist critiques.

To return full circle, Foucault, in one of his last works, writes, "Do we need a theory of power? Since a theory assumes a prior objectification, it cannot be asserted as a basis for analytical work. But this analytical work cannot proceed without an ongoing conceptualisation" (Foucault, 1982: 778). Castells and Negri provide two channels for approaches to the furthering of an analysis of power, and the politics of each provides a basis for conceptualising the political problems of the present.

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