Over the past decade the notion of societal change based on the shifts through which the political economy of information and knowledge are organized has gathered a number of adherents. This has built on a technological narrative about information and communications technologies (ICTs) that goes back at least 30 years if not longer. Much has been written (and disputed) about the emerging global information society; its character has been analyzed, its effects discussed, and its existence queried. However, what cannot be denied is that the notion of a technologically driven societal change is certainly a key element in the analysis of contemporary (global) society. Testament to this fact can be gathered from the appearance of this volume on the “network society” in a series on key concepts that also covers such central analytical concepts as “power,” “governance,” and “democracy” as well as such important issues as “time,” “health,” and “ethnicity.” In this sense Barney’s volume tells us something immediately about the currency of the notion of the “network society” as concept, quite apart from our judgment as regards its empirical veracity.

Barney’s central thesis is that the network society itself is a reflection of the emergence of networks as a key organizing practice across a number of elements of society (specifically technology, economy, politics, and identity). As his survey of the literature that has promised a social revolution through technological change makes clear, this places the work of Manuel Castells at the centre of this new discourse of networks. Indeed, when Castells’ now famous three-volume discussion of the information age was published at the end of the last millennium, a number of reviewers placed this work on par with Max Weber’s three volumes of *Economy and Society*. Thus, if we are to understand the current place of the concept of a network society in analyses of the contemporary world, then we should start with Castells (and the context of his writings). Indeed, as we might expect, Barney returns again and again to Castells’ work to set out exactly how the characteristics of networks play out in each of the realms he wishes to focus on.

At this point, in the interests of full disclosure, I need to note that Barney quotes liberally from my earlier treatment of the information society (*The Information Society: A Sceptical View*). This is not to say that Barney has slavishly followed my analysis, but nevertheless, it does immediately suggest that I might have a certain sympathy with the analysis he develops. As Barney makes clear, while the notion of the network does to some extent capture elements of social change that are evident even to the casual observer, this is not the same as saying that society can be characterized as networked. In other words, although the emergence of networks (and their distinctive patterns of organization) can clearly be observed, they are not constitutive of (global) society, nor do they pattern all elements even of those areas where their advance might be regarded as most evident. I have suggested in my own work that it does not really make sense to discuss the emergence of an information society as a social revolution if the deployment of these technologies leaves the essential elements of capitalist socio-economic organization in place, and Barney makes a similar observation about the “network society.” This is of course not to claim that there is no change linked with the assumption and deployment of networked organizational models and patterns, but rather to recognize this as a change in the form of social relations rather than a transformation of their substance.

Barney suggests that like the notion of the information society before it (and here again he refers to my earlier analysis), the idea of the network society is a rhetorical device meant to assert a recognition of changes that have already happened, and thus urging social actors to respond, that actually brings about the very changes (due to the encouraged reactions) that it merely purports to recognize. Hence, what is crucial about the concept “net-
work society” is not whether it is empirically defensible, but rather the weight it is accorded in public policy and private commercial decision-making. As Barney makes explicit in the last pages of his conclusion, the concept “network society” serves both as a “tool of investigation and interpretation” and as an “ideological discourse that serves a performative, prescriptive function” (p. 181). With this in mind, we can easily see why this book belongs in a series on key concepts, and we can also appreciate the clearly articulated argument that Barney makes; we should not dispense with the idea of the network society, but we should recognize it as both partial in its empirical purchase and clearly politicized in its effects. By normalizing the network, that which is not networked is rendered obsolete or outmoded. If concepts do political work, then Barney’s analysis clearly unveils the political implications of the “network society” as discourse in our contemporary world.

This is a well-written introduction to these issues that coherently contextualizes its account in the various strands of literature that have been developed over the past quarter-century or so, and as such it will be an invaluable tool to those new to the subject seeking to understand the political economy of network society. Barney never loses sight of his prospective audience, but neither does this mean he lapses into a bland or lightweight discourse. This is a well-judged volume that deserves to be widely read by undergraduates and could easily be adopted as a key text for many courses on information society, perhaps most suitably alongside the latest edition of Castells’ discourse-establishing volumes.

Reference

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