

# The Analysis to Two Masks of Manuel Castells' Space-culture Theory

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**Abstract:** In the western postmodern space knowledge pedigree, Manuel Castells' space thoughts not only have the similarity of the cultural criticism to space family theory, but also have the characteristics of theoretical temperament differences because of its unique “social structure-analyzing mode” and “information technology research path”. From the “structural space” based on the urban modernization in the 1970s to the “space of flows” constructed by relying on the development of network information technology in the 1980s, the change of Castells' space concept is a profound metaphor for the structural transformation in the relationship throughout western culture society and modes of space production in recent years. Therefore, by examining and analyzing the two masks of Castells' space culture thoughts, which are the spatial views of “structuralism-Marxism doctrine” and “information-consumption capitalism”, we can discover and explain the multidimensional aspects of cultural and social roots, theoretical discourses and aesthetic political metaphors behind the transformation of space, so as to further correct the study of contemporary space cultural ecology.

## 1. Introduction

The iteration of temporal-spatial experience and awareness reflect the cultural evolvement and aesthetic ethics in the circumstances of human existence in different times. Jameson holds that “Spatial category and logic dominate postmodern society, just as time dominates the modernist world.”[1] Amongst the scholars studying postmodern space, Manuel Castells is a shining star who heralds the school of new Marxist urban culture and a key player in network information spatial criticism. His long academic career has forged the multi meaning and flowing deformation of his spatial thoughts. In the 1960s and 1970s, Castells, heavily influenced by Western Marxism, switched his focus from the study of classic urban spatial criticism geography to examine the capitalist social relation space from the perspective of structuralism-Marxism. In the 1980s and 1990s, he noticed and warned of the rise of network social space, based on which he made the judgment of the “End of Millennium”, by experiencing and examining consumption media capitalism. It follows that “urban geographic space”, “social relation space” and “technological power space” constituted the three basic dimensions in the critical thinking of spatial culture by Castells, whose proposal of “structuralism-Marxism spatial thoughts” and “information-consumption capitalism spatial thoughts” in different stages served as two specific masks of distinctive styles.

## 2. The First Mask: “Structuralism-Marxism” Spatial Thoughts

The theoretical basis and research perspective in the early years of Castells originated from Althusser's structuralism-Marxism. In the meantime, Castells' thinking of structural space was heavily influenced by the “structural pluralism” and “ideological theory” of Nicos Poulantzas as well as the “empirical research methods” of his supervisor Alain Touraine. As a result, Castells' urban internal criticism placed more emphasis on the analysis of non-spatial social progress in urban life (i.e. social structure), compared with the mainstream urban sociology. In essence, such

progress represents his social reflections on cities as “man-made spaces”, which include multidimensional investigations into multiple elements such as capitalist industrialization, opposite classes, workers’ movements and production contradiction. Hence, the early “space” concept of Castells actually contains both explicit and implicit levels: “urban geographic space” as the explicit representation of social life and the abstract “social structural space” that really determines urban development.

“To consider the city as the projection of society on space is both an indispensable starting point and too elementary an approach.”[2] Nevertheless, different from the classic Marxist historical materialism, Castells included the analytical perspective of Althusser in relation to state apparatus and ideology in his definition of “production methods”. Apart from the original political and economic aspects, culture (ideology) has been added as another dimension, to turn urban space from the sheer carrier of material production to a cultural space full of life, contradiction and tension. At the same time, the structural pluralism inherited by Castells is not mechanical, but an organic model that maintains dynamic balance. He believes that cities, as a subsystem of society, is a rectangular matrix that comprises five major elements, i.e., production (P), consumption (C), administration (A), exchange (E) and symbols (S) as well as numerous sub-elements. Their interaction processes shape the specific appearance of cities. Delineation of cities and regions and infrastructure allocation may serve as a bottom-up reflection of the underlying contradictions of social systems in respect of politics, economy and culture. This represents an attempt by Castells to address urban issues through social structure.

“Collective consumption” is an urban planning approach employed by developed capitalist countries to regulate public life and stimulate labor reproduction. “The strategic role of the labor force correspondingly increases the role of the means of collective consumption necessary to it, especially public resources and facilities.”[3] As defined by Castells, “Consumption processes whose organization and management cannot be other than collective given the nature and size of the problems: e.g. housing, collective facilities, leisure provision, etc.”[4] As a behavior of social practice, “collective consumption” undoubtedly provides an effective means of economic intervention and regulation of labor relations for the state, except that behind such collective consumption is a strong ideological inclination and new inequality which stems from the tilted capital allocation and interest gap by bureaucratic governments in consolidating social resources and secondary allocation. In addition, given the large-scale government intervention into the social life of urban residents, the emergence of “collective consumption” has politicized the daily life of advanced capitalist cities. This tremendously altered the original structural demands and use attributes of urban spaces, as they become a domestication instrument that can be manipulated and reflect the will of the ruling class.

The structuralist interpretation model applied by Castells in his early years provides rational dialectical logic for Marxian geography. Nonetheless, with the inversion of “theoretical realism” by “empiricism” in late 1970s and early 1980s, there appeared a gradual decline within the highly shackled Western Marxist spatial philosophy. “One effect of such divisive implosion is that the reactionary sociological theories are instigated to launch counter attacks to Marxian geography, causing many former Marxian geographers to defect and painfully admit their ‘meaculpas’.”[5] As Castells said, “Although class relationships and class struggle are fundamental in understanding urban conflict, they are not, by any means, the only primary source of urban social change.”[6] Roughly since the 1980s, Castells gradually walked away from his early adherence to the aggressive structuralism-Marxism spatial thoughts, and retreated to a more conservative sequence of information-consuming capitalism spatial thoughts, thereby achieving the second transfer of his temporal-spatial experience connotation.

### **3. The Second Mask: “Information-consuming Capitalism” Spatial Thoughts**

In the 1990s, Castells put forward the concept of “space of flows” based on the rise of “network society” and the restructuring of capitalism. “Space of flows is a material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows.”[7] It can be both abstract and concrete. The

realization of “space of flows” requires material support at three levels, including loops for circuit switching, node and hub as well as a spatial organization composed of management elites (not classes) that play a dominant role. Specific “flows” include information flow, capital flow and organizational relation flow as well as the dissemination by mass media. The advent of “space of flows” has broken through the formerly fixated occupational structure and thinking models, accelerated the reconstruction of social relations, and resulted in a new social formation and spatial structure which underlines urban elites and white-collar class in the process of labor relation reorganization. Castells is of the view that such reconfiguration of labor space will ultimately bring about one result, the drastic escalation of binary delineation of community and the formation of binary cities featuring the opposition between affluent and deprived regions. As a special formal symbol, “space of flows” largely determines the way of material production, exchange and spiritual life of modern people. Hence, “space of flows” is not just a material construct of urban life, but a psychological, cultural and logical construct.

As a hyperspace, the network breaks down the boundaries of time, location and even language. In the meanwhile, “In the network society, the ‘space of flows’ dissolves time by disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous in the communication networks, thus installing society in structural ephemerality: being cancels becoming.”[8] In the new time-space equivalent relationship, the status of time and space has been completely reversed. In the network society, space organizes the time and produces a so-called “timeless time” that is subordinated to a “flow” concept. “Timeless time” is an instantaneous, discontinuous and undifferentiated time concept. It exists as an eternal moment that goes beyond the physical time. Furthermore, it can connect and compress all the places worldwide with a function of the network nodes, which eliminates the regional distance limitation, for using space to extend time.

Power relations arising from “flow” are the temporal-spatial logic specific to network society. As Castells said, “That power is the key to understanding the primary source of social structuration and dynamics... Power is exercised by means of coercion (the monopoly of violence, legitimate or not, by the state) and/or by the construction of meaning in people’s minds through mechanisms of cultural production and distribution.”[9] The birth of network space signifies the incorporation of the logic and significance of “space of places” (traditional physical and geographic space) into the virtual network space, and the formation of a parallel set of spatial order and rules to the real world. People can use “node” and “hub” to connect the strategically important functional locations in “space of places”, and leverage the network society to dominate and control the real world. Thereby, network space has also acquired the functional characteristics (i.e., economic, cultural and social functions) equal to real space and with complete meaning, representing and reversely influencing the real view of society and history (such as ecological environment, interpersonal relations and the organizational form of management institutions). Nevertheless, in the process of enabling the network to dominate reality, what leads the right of discourse is a special group of people called “management elites”, who attempt to transcend the historic particularity and cultural diversity of different regions to attain worldwide recognition of elite culture. As such, what network society demonstrates and disseminates is a highly concentrated elite culture.

From the establishment of structural space to the subversion of structural space by “space of flows”, the changes of Castells’ temporal-spatial concept imply that his aesthetic research paradigm has shifted from structural analysis of society and class to the investigation in mobile capital and power relationships. Although the spatial thoughts of Castells indeed features a strong sense of technological determinism in his later stage, he still insists that “New information technology is not the source of changing the organizational logic of the connotations of space and society”. [10] Behind the new technological models and scientific innovations, the determining factor is still the construction of a humanistic identity based on social, economic and historical facts.

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