

Conversation 1

Manuel Castells: Life and Work

MARTIN INCE *Manuel, this is a book about your ideas and your work, focusing on how your thinking has developed, where it has led, and where it is going next. But your life so far has been a remarkable one, which people interested in your work will want to know about in its own right and because of its role in your intellectual development. Please give us the outline.*

MANUEL CASTELLS I was born on 9 February 1942 in a small town of La Mancha, in Spain. The town is Hellin in the province of Albacete. But I have no roots there. My parents were there for a short time because their work was there, then we all left after a year. Since neither I nor the rest of the family knew anyone, I never returned to that town, so my place of birth is misleading if you are interested in my identity. My father (Fernando Castells Adriaensens) was a finance inspector, and my mother (Josefina Olivan Escartin) an accountant, both civil servants with the Spanish Ministry of Finance.

My father's family supposedly comes from Catalonia, and some traces of it go back to the sixteenth century. But my father and grandfather were born in Valencia. There was a military tradition in the family. My grandfather, whom I never knew, was a high-ranking officer in the Army Corps of Engineers. And so was the eldest son of the eldest son in each generation, until my generation. I recruited my cousin to the clandestine resistance to Franco when he was in the military

academy, and he ended up in prison, thus destroying this noble military tradition – his father was immediately discharged from active service. My father was a member of the Phalange Party and fought with the Francoist forces, against the Republic, during the civil war. Later, he became disappointed with Franco, and this limited his promising bureaucratic career. My mother was from a traditional Catholic peasant family from Biescas, a village in the Aragon Pyrenees. She was a very smart, very articulate, very pragmatic woman who was very advanced for her time and context, and always tried to work in her profession. I have only one sister, Irene Castells, two years younger than me. She is a professor of history at the University of Barcelona. I have always adored her, and we have remained very close throughout our lives. Because my father was moving up the career ladder in his finance inspector job, my childhood was spent in Madrid, Cartagena, and Valencia. Finally, I finished secondary school in Barcelona, and I went to the University of Barcelona.

Tell me more about how you view your Catalan identity.

Because I spent the critical years of my adolescence in Barcelona, and because the original matrix of my father's family comes from Barcelona, and because of how I feel, I call myself a Catalan. However, my family was not Catalan-speaking, and Catalan was forbidden in the public realm during the Franco years. But I learned Catalan by myself while I was at the University of Barcelona, mainly for political reasons. I have lost a lot, but I still understand it perfectly and am returning to speaking it fluently. It helps my identity. You could say I am a Catalan nationalist, although certainly not a separatist, and not a supporter of the nationalist party – I usually support the Catalan Socialist Party, which is federalist.

You had a precocious school and college education, I believe?

I entered the university in 1958, when I was 16 (I was two years in advance of the usual age for finishing secondary edu-

cation). I had always been a very good student, under heavy pressure from my father. I studied at the University of Barcelona, both the “Licenciatura” of Law and the “Licenciatura” of Economics. (“Licenciaturas” in the Spanish system were five years at the university and are the usual degree for anyone not going into an academic career.)

My main thing was literature and theater. I won student and college literary and theater awards. But in the repressive climate of the Franco period, just expressing yourself would get you into trouble with the political police. So, after they closed our journal and censored our plays, I had had enough, and entered the clandestine resistance in 1960, when I was 18 years old. At that time there were only a few clandestine groups active in the anti-Franco opposition at the University of Barcelona. It was a risky activity. One was highly likely to be arrested, tortured, and sent to jail for a number of years, besides being expelled from the university and being black-listed for any government job. So in 1960, we were probably no more than 50 activists out of 14,000 students. But we were very determined, and very clandestine. The three main groups were the Catalan nationalists, the Communist Party (the main one), and then a *sui generis*, radical group named the Workers Front of Catalonia (FOC in Catalan), naturally with very few workers in its ranks, made up of proponents of all kinds of ideologies, from Catholics to Marxist-Leninists, Social Democrats, and anarchists.

I saw myself basically as an anarchist, although using Marxist theory. I hated the Communists because they were authoritarian and, in my view at that time, they had betrayed the revolution in the Spanish civil war. So, I joined this FOC group, which was very small, but very active (it eventually became one of the components of the Catalan Socialist Party, a part of the Spanish Socialist Party that governed Spain in 1983–96). My life became fully taken up by politics. I still passed my exams, and I read a lot – a lot of history, politics, Marxist and anarchist theory, Third World issues, political economy. I did not imagine myself as an academic. I wanted to be a lawyer, to defend workers and just causes. But I

wanted to write. I always wanted to write, and had the hope that after the revolution I would really have the time to write my novels, my poetry, my theater. But in May 1962 we were too successful. In cooperation with other anti-Franco groups, we succeeded in organizing a general strike at the university and in a number of factories, to protest against the government in solidarity with the miners' strike in Asturias. It was one of the major challenges to the dictatorship, and the regime was unnecessarily scared by this small group of basically rich kids with no attachment to the traditional republican parties: it was the new Spanish opposition. So they clubbed us. Most of my friends were arrested, tortured, jailed for several years. I was lucky, and I crossed the border to France clandestinely. I did not have time to finish my studies, and I had no money and no connections.

But you set out for Paris and – in time – for success in academic life.

I headed to Paris. I had an address of a Spanish anarchist construction worker linked to the same resistance group I belonged to in Barcelona. He helped me. I obtained political refugee status, and a very small fellowship for political refugees from the French government. I really needed it because, on top of all this, my 18-year-old fiancée, in a romantic impulse, escaped from her parents' home in Barcelona, joined me in Paris, and naturally we soon had a baby – my only daughter, Nuria Castells. So I enrolled in the Faculty of Law and Economics at the Sorbonne, and finished my degrees in Public Law and Political Economy. I also worked half-time (as an editor in a publishing house) to pay our rent, and shared the care of the child. My fiancée, now wife, was also studying full-time. We divorced six years later, on very friendly terms, and we are still friends. We were simply too young to marry for ever . . . She now lives in Barcelona, and is a very famous demographer. I have always been very close to my daughter. Nuria and I remained – and we remain – very, very close. She is the anchor of my life, the best thing

that ever happened to me. She lives in Geneva now, where she is an economist with the United Nations, with her husband and children, and we are in daily contact by email.

I finished my “licence” at the Sorbonne. In the meantime I was disappointed with Spanish politics in Paris exile, so in 1964 I decided that my future would be in an academic career, because it was freer than any other job, and was close to my intellectual and political interests. I decided on sociology because it was the most politically charged discipline, but I had no idea what sociology was. So I asked around who was doing “working class sociology” (it turned out to be called in academic terms the “sociology of work”). It was Alain Touraine, the rising star of French sociology. I went to see him without having any idea who he was. I asked him if it was true that there was something called sociology that could give me a job (and a fellowship to start with) for studying the strategies of class struggle for the working class. He laughed, and said yes. Then I asked if I could do my dissertation with him on the miners’ strikes in Asturias, and he said yes again. He later told me that he was seduced by my naiveté and determination. But I was the one who was really seduced by him. Within months I enrolled in the doctoral program with him at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the French elite social sciences graduate school in Paris.

Touraine has been very important to you, personally and professionally. Tell me more about his role in your career.

Touraine, a historian by training, was aiming to found a new school of sociological theory, and taught me everything I know, in the fundamental sense. He is extremely cultivated, a great empirical researcher, a most sophisticated theoretician, knew every culture, spoke many languages, including particularly perfect Spanish (his wife was Chilean), had been teaching and researching in America, and was very political, very committed to good causes, but independent from any party’s discipline, my kind of socially responsible libertarian.

Touraine became, and he remains, my intellectual father. My entire intellectual life, my career, and my life, were shaped and protected by Touraine. Without him I could never have survived the ideological repression of French academia. (For instance, Pierre Bourdieu tried to destroy me professionally.)

It was only thanks to Touraine that I survived as an academic in the Parisian elite institutions. And Touraine protected me in spite of the fact that in explicit terms I was not his disciple. I went into a Marxist intellectual trajectory, not following his very abstract and sophisticated theoretical paradigm, because I felt the need to communicate to the world of political change through its language – Marxism.

I did my dissertation with Touraine. But not the one I wanted. Instead, I accidentally became an urban sociologist. Touraine got a big research contract for his center from the regional government of Paris to do a most boring study: a statistical analysis of patterns of industrial location in the metropolitan area of Paris. He had no interest in it, but his center needed the money. So he needed a tough research assistant to do it. Unlike most sociology students in France at the time, I had some notion of statistics. And Touraine was always worried about how I could survive on my tiny fellowship, me a poor political exile with a young wife and a baby. So he was thrilled to offer me a well-paid job as a researcher at his center, with the chance of using all these data for my dissertation, and finish it quickly. Besides, there was not much urban sociology in France at the time, and this could be an expanding field (it was). Yet I said no. This seemed to me like a plot to lure me into the capitalist technocracy and into this bourgeois field of urban sociology. So I said no, and no, and no. Until Touraine felt he had to fulfill his paternal duties, and offered me a stark choice: either the shining path towards being a premier theorist in urban sociology, and in the meantime getting out of poverty with a good salary, or he would drop me from his supervision, my doctoral enrollment would be in jeopardy, and I could lose my meager fellowship.

This is how I became an urban sociologist. Of course, I finished my dissertation quickly. It was based on a statistical analysis of locational strategies of industrial firms in the Paris area – I did discover the specific pattern for location of high-technology firms, so for the first time understanding the logic of high-tech companies. And then in January 1967 (I was 24) I was appointed (again by Touraine) assistant professor of sociology at the new Nanterre campus of the University of Paris. This was a dream sociology department: the professors were Alain Touraine, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Crozier, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (later president of Brazil – this is how we have been friends since 1967).

One thing everyone seems to know about you is the fact that you were involved in the tumultuous events of May '68 in Paris.

Even more interesting than the professors was the student movement that started to develop on this campus, centered in the sociology department. Among my first students was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who went on to be the leader of the May '68 movement and is now a leading Green politician in Germany and Europe in general. So, politics again. While working hard on urban sociology, discussing Marxist theory in the seminar of the philosopher Louis Althusser at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, and teaching methodology (I knew how to count, unlike most of the French philosophers who had converted to sociology), I entered fully into the semi-anarchist May '68 movement. It started on the new Nanterre campus where I was working. The May '68 movement was an extraordinary experience, one of the most beautiful of my life. Suddenly, revolution was possible, was there. But not the political revolution, not the seizure of state power, but the change of life, of being, of feeling, without political intermediation. These were two exhilarating months of nonstop intellectual/political debate, demonstrations, the self-management of everything, and free love. Naturally, at the end, political realities clamped down, and the political

revolution was crushed. But not the ideas, not the ideals, that went on to change our way of thinking, and therefore, through many mediations, our societies. Not only France, but the world at large.

But the story ends in another political exile.

I was caught by the police in one of the demonstrations at the end of the movement, by mid-June 1968, and expelled to Geneva. It was the first flight of my life – courtesy of the French government.

I landed in Geneva with no money and no job, with a two-week permit. The correspondent of *Le Monde* in Geneva, Isabelle Vichiniak, took me into her home. Then Touraine helped out, and Unesco gave me a six-month contract to teach methodology in Chile. This is how I discovered Chile, in 1968, and became attached to that country. Although I could not stay more than six months then, later on I managed to obtain a visiting chair at the Catholic University of Chile, so using the hemispheric difference. Between 1970 and 1973 I taught in the French winter in Paris, and in the Chilean winter in Chile. This is how I participated in the Allende experience of democratic socialism in Chile, while teaching, researching, and writing – until the 1973 Pinochet *coup* barred me from access to Chile: my third exile.

And the fourth not far away, I think?

At the end of my first Chilean experience, in November 1968, my friend Fernando Henrique Cardoso invited me to his home in São Paulo and asked me to become a junior professor with him in Brazil, the country of the future. I said yes, and I was ready to become a Brazilian, but before we could implement the project, the military intervened in the university and expelled Cardoso and all the leading Brazilian intellectuals: this was my fourth, symbolic exile.

Time to try somewhere a little more stable?

In 1969, exiled from Spain and expelled from France, I ended up in Montreal, where Touraine's connections offered me a regular academic job at the University of Montreal. I loved it. I fell in love with Quebec. Yet, politics in Quebec was dominated (justifiably) by Québécois nationalism. I could not fully inject myself into that project, although it had all my sympathies. Then, in 1970, Touraine convinced the French Government to pardon me, and offered me a new job as associate professor with tenure at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, again using my methodological edge to organize the methodological training program for doctoral students in all areas of study. I finally organized a doctoral program in urban sociology. It established me in the French (and international) academic world.

But presumably you continued to think politically at the same time?

I went seriously into Marxist theory in the 1970s. My entry point was not Althusser, as people think, but Nicos Poulantzas, a Greek political philosopher who studied in Heidelberg and Paris, and became the most sophisticated and most political of the Althusserian group of philosophers in Paris, becoming a professor at the University of Paris. He was one of the most famous political theorists in the world in the 1970s. We entered a deep intellectual dialogue, and became very close friends, almost brothers. His suicide in 1979 was one of the most devastating experiences of my life.

My attempt to bring together Marxist theory, urban sociology, a Tourainian knack for social movements, and my personal emphasis on empirical research led to the writing of my first book, *The Urban Question*, published in French in February 1972. For me it was simply to put my thoughts in order, kind of my notebook of thoughts and projects to work on urban sociology from a new, more political perspective. It became an instant hit in France and in the world (10 translations, dozens of editions, well over 100,000 copies sold in

the world of a most abstract, theoretical, academic book, usually obscurely translated, specially in English). However, together with Lefebvre, this became the foundation stone of the so-called New School of Urban Sociology. It took over the academic world of urban studies for the next decade.

Tell me about the attractions of the US academic system – which is about to become your so-far permanent academic base.

While working on my urban research in Paris, I was increasingly attracted by American universities. I admired the institutions, their flexibility, their seriousness, the quality of their students. And I was much more “American” than “French” in my style of research, always interested in empirical inquiry, then adding a French theoretical touch, and a Spanish political angle. So, I seized the opportunity to become a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1975 and 1977, at the University of California–Santa Cruz, in 1977, and at Boston University, in 1976, while keeping my professorship in Paris. Then Spanish politics called me back. Franco died; Spain was on the verge of becoming a democracy. Urban social movements were rampant in Madrid and Barcelona, and they were using my writings. So in 1977–9 I lived between Paris and Madrid, helping out the development of urban social movements, while investigating them. Then, in 1979, Spain was a democracy, the municipalities of the main cities were in the hands of the Socialists, my friends were in power, my theories had been vindicated, and Paris was boring and stagnant. I was wondering about my life.

Then out of the blue came an offer from Berkeley to take an urban sociology professorship. Why not? Why not try to the end the academic project, now that Spain was free, and Paris was beyond hope of doing anything intellectually significant? This is how, in September 1979, when I was 37, I became a Berkeley professor. In Berkeley I started by immersing myself in research on the city, to know the place, and to feel the society. The city means San Francisco, since Berkeley was and is a village – and an unusual one, beyond my comprehension. So I studied urban social movements in

San Francisco, the Latino movement, and I discovered the gay community and its capacity to transform cities, politics, and culture. I brought together all my 12 years of work on urban social movements around the world in my book *The City and the Grassroots*, which for me remains my best urban book and the best piece of empirical research I have been able to do. It received the 1983 C. Wright Mills Award, one of the most prestigious in America. But it was not as influential as *The Urban Question* – because I clearly departed from Marxism, so my ideological followers were disappointed, even if I made explicit that I was not anti-Marxist, just that I could not use Marxism any longer as a tool to explain what I observed and researched.

Most readers of this book are waiting to hear about the origins of The Information Age: can I feel it coming on?

In 1983, having finished my decade-long research project on urban social movements, I was thinking about what next. It came to me, without me having to find a subject. Silicon Valley, right next door, was exploding with technological ingenuity, business innovation, and cultural change. I sensed something big was happening, much bigger than we thought in Europe. So I decided to work on the relationship between technology, economy, and society.

But I took two precautions. First, I would run an initial test, analyzing this interaction on a field of study I knew well: cities, regions, spatial transformation. This led, six years later, to another big book, *The Informational City*, that opened up a new field of research in urban studies, calling attention to information technology and its spatial consequences. Second, I would start from California, but I did not want to fall into the ethnocentric approach characteristic of Daniel Bell's post-industrialism theory, the main theory on the matter at that time. I was helped by the fact that my Socialist friends came into government in Spain in 1983, so I spent time in Spain, advising and researching – although never working for the government, always from the university world. I spent one year in Spain in 1984–5, directing a major study on the

social and economic effects of new technologies at the university, but sponsored by Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez's office. A two-volume book was published in 1986 with a preface by Gonzalez. Thus, I was measuring, and analyzing, the techno-social transformation simultaneously from California and from Spain. I went on in 1988–93 to split my time between Berkeley and Madrid, where I created an Institute for the Sociology of New Technologies at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

In the meantime, I decided that to avoid ethnocentric biases in my big project, I had to know more of the world, and particularly the Asian Pacific, the seedbed of new development. I accepted visiting professorships at the universities of Hong Kong and Singapore (I wrote a book comparing the two cities' economic development), and lectured and researched in Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Japan – with a few excursions to other Asian countries. And I still kept in close contact with Latin America, particularly with Mexico and Brazil. Then, in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union opened up, I went in depth into understanding this process of change, and retrospectively the Soviet Union in its reality. This decision was helped by the fact that on my first visit to the Soviet Union in 1984 – in Siberia, invited by the Academy of Sciences – I met Emma Kiselyova (then director of international relations at the Institute of Economics), who came to Berkeley in 1993, and became my wife, after a long and complicated process. So, between 1989 and 1993 I conducted a number of studies on the Russian transition, in cooperation with Russian colleagues, in Moscow and Siberia. Emma Kiselyova and I wrote a little book, published in 1995: *The Collapse of Soviet Communism: A View from the Information Society*, summarizing these studies.

In 1993, I decided to leave Madrid completely, go back to Berkeley, and concentrate on organizing, elaborating, and writing the book that I had had in my mind for 10 years – but at a slow pace, anticipating maybe another 10 years of further research and elaboration, from the protected environment of the Berkeley campus. Emma decided to join me

at that time. We started a new life. And then, in August 1993, after a few days of being back in Berkeley, I was diagnosed with kidney cancer.

With Emma's full support, I confronted the illness. They removed one kidney, and thought that the result of the operation was good. There is essentially no effective treatment for kidney cancer except surgery. So, after the operation I talked to my surgeon and told him I had something important to do, and I needed to plan my time accordingly. "How much time can I count on, for sure?" He answered: "For sure, three years." So I organized myself to write the book I had had in mind for so long in these three years – while still teaching full-time in Berkeley, because this was my job and my salary. My wife Emma helped very much. The book became a trilogy, *The Information Age*, even trying to compress as much as I could. There was too much information, too many ideas, and the topic was evolving in real time, particularly the Internet and the process of globalization.

By the summer of 1996 I thought things were under control, I felt physically very well, so I gave myself an additional three months to finish the trilogy. Well, exactly three years after my operation they discovered a recurrence, which led to a much bigger operation – I shall spare you the details. I organized myself to print an unfinished trilogy. Yet, I survived, and the operation was a stunning success – I got the best surgeon, the one reserved as the last resort in these cases. So, one month after leaving the hospital, I was up and running to finish my book. When I was almost done, my wife fell gravely ill, and needed major surgery as well. I almost gave up, but she convinced me I should go on and finish this project that we had done together. I sent the final volume of the trilogy to John Davey, my Blackwell's Maecenas and protector, the day before I took Emma to the surgery, in February 1997. She also had successful surgery and is doing very well now.

And then another life-altering event: the appearance of The Information Age?

After I finished the trilogy, and Emma left hospital, we took a sabbatical in Barcelona. Then I was stunned by the extraordinary, immediate impact of the trilogy around the world. Between the publication of the first volume in English in November 1996 and early 2002, it has been reprinted 15 times – including a 2000 edition that features a 40 percent new first volume and a substantially revised third volume. It has been translated, or is in the process of being translated, in time order into Spanish, French, Chinese, Swedish, Portuguese, Russian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Turkish, Korean, Japanese, German, Italian, Romanian, Danish, Parsi, and Arabic. In all the languages in which it has been published until now it has become an instant hit, with multiple reprintings. So I decided that for the time remaining to me I should engage in a dialogue with people around the world – academics, grassroots groups, political leaders, and the business world. They all wanted to talk to me. I had to be very selective: I receive about 1,000 invitations per year at the moment, but decline 85 percent. And remember, I teach full-time in Berkeley, and I care very much about having time with my wife, friends, and family. I relate to the world in two ways: the media – through interviews, mainly by email, but also face to face when I find myself somewhere. Second, by organizing tours of specific areas twice a year, using the summer vacation and the Christmas vacation, and always traveling with my wife. So we go to Europe every year (Spain, England, France, Russia, and lately to Finland and Sweden), and in 1998 we went to Argentina and Bolivia, in 1999 to Brazil and Chile, and in 2000 to South Africa. Seminars, debates, learning from the experience, providing my views, and going beyond the analysis presented in the trilogy. In the meantime, Oxford University Press seduced me into writing a little book on the Internet, *The Internet Galaxy*. But for me even a little book is a lot of work – research, thinking, writing. It took me two and a half years and was finished in April 2001 and published that October.

Tell me about the life you lead now in Berkeley [in 2001].

After my second operation in October 1996, I set myself on a temporary horizon, living from six months to six months, the span of my medical examinations. I was not being anxious or thinking about illness, just living in the present, not thinking about anything else – and I was not nervous or depressed. I was very happy to see that my work was creating the debate I always wanted. Then, in 2000, my doctors told me they thought I was over the danger of recurrence. I did not and still do not believe them really; but since I feel great, and since examinations are now only once a year, the time horizon has gone back.

As for my family, I am lucky to be married to the love of my life, Emma. Not many people can say that, particularly when you meet your love in Siberia, in the midst of the Soviet era. I have a daughter, Nuria, with a wonderful husband; she is an economist, and he a cutting edge computer scientist (recently featured by the BBC for his work on the brain's neural networks relating to computers), and two magnificent grandchildren, Clara and Gabriel, who live in Geneva. I also have a wonderful stepdaughter Lena, and her daughter Alexandra, whom I consider my granddaughter. I am very, very close to the two of them, and we often spend vacations together (they live in Novosibirsk . . .).

I live in Berkeley in the same house that I bought (with help from the university) when I arrived here in 1979. I work about 10 hours a day, mainly from my study at home, a lot on-line. I have no secretary, no research assistant, no special treatment (I teach like everybody else at Berkeley, six hours a week). I have been very well treated by the university, and I am at the very top of the professorship ladder, but without any kind of privileges. I am an individual artisan of research. But I do receive huge amounts of information from my students (always duly cited), who are excellent, and from many people around the world who have sent me their work for information and comment.

I love Barcelona, and so does Emma. Maybe – who knows? – we will end our life there. In any case, I want my ashes to end up in the Mediterranean, in front of the Barcelona beach.