

Pattern in the Social Sciences

Sara Boas continues her conversation with Fritjof Capra by looking at his current immersion in the social sciences, the subject of his next book

The previous part of this interview in Fourth Door Review 4 ended with Fritjof proclaiming his social activism. In this concluding part of the interview the social dimension of Capra's interests are explored, primarily through his interest in the work of the Spanish social theorist, Manuel Castells. Castells' work throughout the nineties was influential in reframing the social sciences in the light of several interconnected emerging phenomena: Globalisation, the networked economy, and the networked media culture. Whilst the conversational dialogue with Sara Boas doesn't suggest Capra is any kind of theoryhead in a classic social science typology, it does reveal a man interested in maintaining an up-to-the-minute knowledge of the sort of contemporary fields of learning, perhaps originating from Capra's earlier youthful immersion in radical politics. Indeed, in the slightly different but related frame of environmental politics, Capra was one of the first to attempt to publicise the emerging European green political movement in his 1984 book, *Green Politics, the Global Promise*. Today, Capra appears to be returning to something of this terrain as his latest book will be on the emergent qualities identifiable in social science. It should be published next year.

This conversation reveals something of Capra's approach, both regarding Castells, and the whole knotty terrain of the social sciences.

Sara Boas: When you look back over all your writing, to what extent has it been a way for you to be an activist, or to act as an agent of social change?

Fritjof Capra: Well this is something I learnt from Castells and this was very exciting to me. Castells says that in this networked society, as he calls it, there is a global network of financial flows, and flows of information. And he says power lies in these financial and informational flows, and people who can control and become aware of these flows are in positions of power.

And in this world where everything is interconnected, financial transactions are interconnected, with companies working globally, and different parts of a product being assembled in different countries. Because of computer and information technology, all this can be managed in this way.

In this, world politics, Castells says, becomes a politics of media and, of course, this is what we have observed in the last ten years or so. Politics does not take place in Parliament any more, but on CNN. So Castells says that political power flows from the ability to manipulate symbols and communicate ideas and visions. He says the fight for social change is now a cultural fight, not a political fight in the Marxist sense. So when I looked back on my work I realised this is what I had always done. I had always fought a cultural fight in terms of explaining and communicating ideas, advocating visions, values, manipulating symbols. The very origin of my whole writing with *The Tao Of Physics* lies in a collage of a dancing Shiva and particle tracks superimposed. The image is in the book. I made that collage with a photographer friend of mine, and I had it hanging in my living room for about a year before I started writing. So this is really the origin of the book. You know it's the manipulation of symbols, that's what it is. So in that sense you can say I've been an activist in all my writing.

S: Yes, it's fascinating. And I suppose one of the effects of the network structure of society and the way information flows on the net is that you don't control where your information goes. It's already there when you write a book, but perhaps even more so with the presence of the Internet.

F: I'm in a curious position myself. For one thing I'm not interested in technology. It's not one of my passions. And I'm also not interested in power in the sense of controlling. I'm interested in communicating, empowering people. Power as influence, but not power

Linda Gordon: 'Skyboat'

as control. So I am not interested in sitting at key points in the global network where you hold power if you have certain information. This is not my life. I'm not even on the Internet. It just doesn't interest me. In fact, information itself doesn't interest me. Obviously I need information like everybody else, but what really interests me is ideas. And often people confuse ideas and information. I'm certainly more interested in ideas than information.

S: I think the term 'information' is being used more and more broadly, and in my understanding of the idea of Information Age, is one in which knowledge...

F: You see information is not knowledge, but the two are used synonymously.

S: Yes, this word 'information' has become expanded, in a way. Political action used to be about control over material production, and now, perhaps, it's to do with information.

F: That's right. And that's Castells' point. He actually uses the terms, 'informational society' and 'informational capital...' and he says, in the networked society there's the abstract space of financial flows where the power lies, and then there are locales. He calls them locales, for places where people live and suffer – where the material world is. That really brings us to this whole question of social space.

S: I agree that matter is much more accessible than structure.

F: And, than social structure. Do you think that the structure of an organisation, which is a non-material structure, that it is an embodiment?

S: I would not precisely because it's non-material. And I think what's important about embodiment is that what we're talking about is the way that it's becoming manifest in the living body, and in the environment. And also, the question of symbolic power is very important.

F: Did you read what Castells writes about the three types of identity? That's very interesting. He'd include your description within the type of legitimate identity. Then he talks about resistance identity and then project identity. And project identity would relate to emergent structures in a community of practice. I found that very good.

S: Although he's very interested in a particular kind of identity which is a collective-declared identity. I actually think that questions of identity, in relation to the self, are extremely important and are more and more important.

F: He's interested in the sense of belonging to the community.

S: That's right. He's a Catalan after all. But he makes this extremely interesting statement about the increasing importance about this polarity of the self and the net. And I think historically that's very important and will become more so as we have increasingly individualised identities, I believe, alongside those collective identities. Certainly the work that I do for example, in my transcultural competence, I look a lot at how individual identity is constructed at the meeting point, as a node or intersection of many collective identities, because we no longer have these nested identities that people used to have. We have these kinds of overlap and pattern, so we have these web-like structures.

