Chapter II
The Information Society: A Global Discourse and its Local Translation into Regional Organizational Practices

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on the information society is characterised by a democratic ideal of “general access.” In this chapter, we follow the transformation of such an ideal as the discourse of the information society is translated by the Swedish parliament and implemented in a high-tech region north of Stockholm. We will see that as the discourse is being implemented, it incorporates ethnic categorical boundaries that structure the region and segregates the community where it is being implemented. The main argument of the chapter is that categorical inequalities are embedded in the economic rationality/business logic that structures the discourse on the information society, resulting in socioeconomic, geographic, and technological segregation.

During the last thirty to forty years, a new way of conceiving contemporary societies seems to have emerged. To describe the society we inhabit, scholars have started to use metaphors such as the “post-industrial society,” the “post-Fordist society,” (Amin, 1994), the “network society” (Castells, 1996/2000), or the “age of unworldliness” (Marquard, 1991). Conferences and seminars are organized to discuss the “image economy” (Dobers & Schroeder, 2003) and journals bearing the title “the information society” are established. The last ten to fifteen years have seen an expansion of that worldview and today indexes rank states according to how well they are adapted to the “new economy” (Atkinson & Correa, 2007), politicians discuss how to make it
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into the “global economy,” the EU launches calls for research proposals on the “knowledge society,” and journalists write on the “global village.”

The profusion of terms and analysis of contemporary society attest to the lively discussion on the essence of modern society and the role information technologies play in it. Neo-liberal observers praise the arrival of the information society as the coming of an open and self-regulated world market. Neo-Marxist-oriented analysts warn that the information society is widening and cementing already existing socioeconomic class inequalities. For some, information technologies are the means to empower and develop all groups of society; for others, information technologies are embedded into social dichotomies giving raise to unemployment, the lowering of wages, the lost of labor rights, poverty, exclusion, the deregulation of the welfare state, or migration (Bauman, 2004). Some stress the potential for a truly professional and caring society while others worry about the tightened control over the population. Often, however, and independently of political affiliations, political economist and policy makers use the term to legitimate a wide range of governmental measures—from neo-liberal policies aimed at deregulating markets and liberalizing business rules to more interventionist policies to give incentive to a particular business sector (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000).

At another level of discussion, disagreement exists on whether today’s society is substantially different to any other previous. On the one hand, some argue that what we are currently seeing is the emergence of a society that is radically different to those we have inhabited up to date. On the other hand, there are scholars who maintain that the difference between contemporary and previous societies is merely one of degree. These concede that information and theoretical knowledge play a special role in the present era but insist that current social changes are incremental, not radical in nature. Whereas proponents of the first view stress newness, discontinuity, and inevitability of the changes, the second focus on continuities, persistence, and possibility to shape the course of the changes (Webster, 2002).

The debates on the information society are thus many and varied. Yet, independently on the position one takes in what regards the goods or evils of the information society, and independently on whether society is undergoing a radical or an incremental change, one fact cannot be denied: the discourse of the information society has taken public discussion and scholar analysis with force.

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An interesting and, I believe, fruitful analytical distinction is relevant here. A distinction separating the information society as a descriptive term referring to a period in a larger historical process from the information society as a discourse, a way of comprehending the world, an ideology.

The information society can be regarded as a set of ideas, of language and social practices that provide knowledge on a particular subject: A discourse. As such, it defines and constructs the objects of our knowledge—in this case, “the information society”—sustaining a regime of truth (Foucault, 1980). A discourse is an institutionalized way of thinking, delimiting what can and cannot be said about a topic. Few question, for instance, the fact that information technologies are somehow shaping society. What is put into question is how far this shaping has gone and whether the shaping is occurring in one or both directions. None doubt the centrality of knowledge in that society for that matter, and few would dare to deny its global reach. The nuances are put, however, on how far that knowledge is reaching and on the parallel globalization of a new sort of inequalities.

“Institutionalized way of thinking”—the concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge