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INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL CASTELLS

Alexander Cuthbert

Manuel Castells is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of California at Berkeley and Professor of Sociology at the University of Madrid. He has written at least ten highly acclaimed books on the dynamics of urban development, most notably *The Urban Question* (1972), *City, Class and Power* (1978), *The City and The Grassroots* (1983) and *The Informational City* (1989). He is also the author of *The Economic Crisis and American Society* (1980). Currently he is finalising research on a theory of what he calls 'the network society' for his next book, *The Net and The Self: Economy, Society and Culture in The Information Age*. This interview was undertaken by Alexander Cuthbert, Professor of Town Planning at the University of NSW and editorial advisor to the journal *Polis* where it was first published. It touches on a wide array of contemporary developments requiring the attention of political economists worldwide.

Q: *Throughout your life you have been resolutely committed to socialist principles as a moral foundation for the critique of capitalist development. In the last ten years however, not only have we seen the total collapse of socialism, but also the wholesale embracing of capitalism by prior socialist economies, Eastern Europe, The Soviet Union and now China. While we know that Marx had little to say about socialism, to what extent do you consider that the validity of a Marxist (or Neo-Marxist) perspective in the analysis of society has been seriously weakened - a theory and a method, now without a cause?*

Castells: I was a socialist, not a Communist, at the age of 16, and I am still a socialist, and a strong critic of Soviet Communism and of the Soviet experience. There is a clear distinction between the socialist tradition, as lived in Britain or in Australia, and the Leninist/Stalinist capture of revolutionary ideals in the international Communist movement. I could even say that the worst enemy of socialism and of socialist ideals and policies has been the Communist movement, because

it destroyed the credibility of such ideas in the hearts and minds of many people, particularly in Russia and Eastern Europe.

As for Marxist theory, it also suffered from its ideological abduction in the Marxist-Leninist aberration (whose essence I criticised - and I was criticised because of it - in my book *The City and the Grassroots*, twelve years ago). A serious analysis of Leninism shows its distortion of the most important Marxian ideas. Marxism was never a unified theory, but a current - contradictory, diversified and alive - until it was petrified by the ideological apparatuses of Stalinism, Trotskyism, and other Leninisms. To some extent, we could think that the end of Communism - (China is "Communism with Chinese characteristics") - does not have to imply the demise of Marxist theory, but, to the contrary its liberation from ideological dogmatism (not from ideology because ideology is always present in all theories). Indeed, I do not think (and I did not think) that the divide must be between Marxism and bourgeois theory, another Stalinist construction.

Q: *Given all of your written work, *The Urban Question* remains a seminal text which revolutionised urban studies some twenty five years ago. If you were to write a text today of the same name, would you still subtitle it 'A Marxist approach?'*

Castells: On reflection, the subtitle of *The Urban Question*, "A Marxist Approach", was a bad decision of my English publisher, to which I did not object. In the original French edition (or in any other language edition in fact, in the eight other languages of the translation) there was not such a subtitle. However, it would be too easy to refer to the liberation of Marxist theory from dogmatism. The theory in itself is obsolete. Not only because societies are dynamic, but because more than a century of research and thinking have provided us with better intellectual tools to analyse our world and that of the past (eg. the rediscovery of urban social movements and of women's movements in the Paris Commune, considered by Marxist orthodoxy to be a proto-proletarian revolution in spite of historical evidence). But I think it is intellectually absurd to renounce Marxism. You do not renounce theories but religions or ideologies. Thus, I use some tools of Marxism that I believe are useful (eg. the concept of mode of production), I use

others from other traditions, and I invent whatever I need. I try to make them work logically and empirically in the craft of research.

Q: *Manuel, your last book *Technopoles of The World* (co-authored with Peter Hall), appears much more empirically focussed and much less concerned with the exigencies of theory. Am I correct in this, and if so, does this represent a significant departure from "the political" in your own thinking?*

Castells: As for the variation of style in *Technopoles of the World*, it is simply due to the characteristics of this book, which I like very much by the way. This is a policy oriented book, written to help inform the debate on the development of technological complexes all over the world. It is intentionally written for a wide audience of practitioners, planners, industrialists, and policy makers, and although there are drops of theory, they are conveniently diluted to be digested. As for my own work, I am at this point writing the most ambitious theoretical book of my life (*The Net and the Self: Economy, Society and Culture in the Information Age*, to be published by Blackwell in 1996), and one that is clearly sociological, although I do analyse the new informational/global economy. I am a sociologist and a theorist, this is my real trade, and this is what I want to be judged for. I love life, and thus I have always been politically active, and committed to professional projects, and to urban development adventures, such as science cities or sustainable development programs, but what Manuel Castells wanted to be, was, and is, is a sociologist, trying to understand emerging social forms and processes, in all domains and in all cultures.

Q: *What you have called "the informational mode of development" is not the result of historical necessity, but of historical development. Consequently those countries for whom the information superhighway is an extension of their own evolutionary process seem best tuned to exploiting this new system of production - predominantly Western Europe, The United States and Japan. How did this affect development in the Soviet Union?*

Castells: The most important single cause for the demise of the Soviet Union was its systemic inability to manage the transition to the information society. This is the argument I make, capping seven years of

research on Russia (published with my wife, Emma Kiseleva, *The Collapse of Soviet Communism: the View from the Information Society*, University of California at Berkeley, International and Areas Studies, Essay Series, 1995). It is in fact a verification of an old Marxian idea according to which social systems may stall the development of productive forces, resulting in a systemic crisis, although in our analysis we show the importance of specific political factors.

Q: *In general do you consider that the same revolution in information which has assisted economic development in the West will hinder the same process in the (former)Soviet Union - in other words is there not a particular social and political infrastructure that must be set in place for this information superhighway to work in favour of economic growth?*

Castells: Information technology needs a flexible social and political structure to diffuse its potential. Statism in general (different from the state's own strategic interventionism à la Japanese) precludes such flexibility. This technological disability has serious consequences, not only for economic growth but for military capability. The Soviet system entered into a crisis when its *raison d'etre*, military power, came under the threat of technological obsolescence, making it impossible for the system to retrench into itself.

Q: *You have also traced the demise of the Soviet Union to its defence spending. Do you consider that there has been an ideological shift of such dimensions that this will not continue?*

Castells: Defence spending was crippling the Soviet economy, making it literally impossible to fulfil the promises of a better life for its citizens. Defence spending became a drag on the system, when in spite of its enormous size it started to lose its ability to keep the military power of the Soviet Union, beyond the ability to blow up the planet in a nuclear holocaust, so that Soviet military power was either too big to be used or too technologically backward to enforce its global domination in conventional high-tech warfare.

Q: *Do you consider that China is managing the transition to capitalism better than Russia or it is just slower to react to an inevitable process of social disintegration?*

Castells: China is different, because the whole revolutionary process was different: it was never a proletarian revolution, and it did not break the peasantry, thus enabling society to evolve. Yet China also had to quit statism to be able to modernise technologically, and it did so remarkably by maintaining the power of the Communist Party while undoing communist ideology and the communist management system. Gorbachev did the opposite: he tried to dismantle the power of the Party while maintaining the structures of the State. I believe China will be the great power of the 21st century, not only because of its population (I do not think Nigeria will), but because of its level of education, entrepreneurialism and skilful integration into the global economy, particularly via Hong Kong and overseas Chinese business networks.

Q: *Deng Shau Ping is clearly a very old and extremely sick man, and a new era in Chinese politics is imminent. How do you consider that China will deal with the transition to 'capitalism with a Chinese face' and what types of conflict appear likely given the dynamics of its political system?*

Castells: The transition after Deng's funeral will not be easy. It will not take the form of ideological confrontation but of fighting between the central government and powerful local and provincial governments that are currently the main centers of economic accumulation and linkage with Chinese overseas investors. There will be struggles between capitalist fractions organised in various levels of Communist apparatuses and taking the form of struggles for autonomy versus coordination. The future of the world is, more than anywhere else, being played out in China and in the Pacific. One additional caveat: Siberia is the missing link of the Pacific economy: its huge natural and energy resources, together with a strong scientific base, are the natural complement to the energy-starved Asian-Pacific economies. Thus, I will be doing field work in Sakhalin and the Russian Far East in the coming months, and I hope to be able to provide some interesting analyses on the matter in the near future.

Q: *Along with the collapse of socialism and the development of information superhighways we have also witnessed a phenomenal rise in organised crime, and new "modes of production" of criminality. As we know, information production and industrial production are now matched in dollar value by drug trafficking and other forms of crime which massively penetrate "legitimate" financial regions - one of them is clearly the built environment. In Sterling Seagrave's book *The Soong Dynasty* it is quite clear that in the twenties and thirties, organised crime was the only cohesive force for social organisation in China. The Soviet Union is now a major money laundering centre and distribution network for trafficking in everything from cocaine to plutonium. There is evidence which indicates that national crime syndicates are now going global. None of this is considered in the literature on development. To what extent do you consider that the twenty first century could be the century of organised crime?*

Castells: The rise of a global criminal economy, using information technology, is a central feature of our society. Not only are the roots of major turbulences in the capital markets (the U.N. estimates an annual figure of US\$ 750 billion in money laundering from illicit sources), but organised crime is penetrating political systems all over the world, from Italy (Andreotti) to the United States (Miami is in fact the Latin American capital of drug deals), to Mexico (Raul Salinas - the Tamaulipas cartel), to the Chinese triads, to the Japanese Yakuza, or Galicia (Spain) as the key Colombian connection in Europe. We cannot understand the current world economy *and politics* without reference to this phenomenon. You see, in December 1994 my old and very close friend Fernando Henrique Cardoso decided to have a last intellectual seminar with twelve friends from around the world before assuming the Presidency of Brazil. We met in Brasilia for two days, and it was one of the most stimulating discussions I have had in years. I was in charge of the introductory report describing the new world system. When I included as a major factor the global criminal economy, a distinguished American economist, while acknowledging the fact, argued that since we cannot really measure it or know it in rigorous terms, it cannot be in our analytical picture.

Q: *Surely this ostrich syndrome has not only been evident in the writings of theorists, but also within governments, in spite of the very evident connection, for example, in America between urban politics, trade unions and organised crime?*

Castells: This is indeed the general attitude in the world today. Not only is this politically suicidal (it makes us blind to the real world), but it is intellectually unacceptable. When physicists cannot observe black holes, they measure them by their gravitational force. Would we be finally willing to introduce as a hypothesis the presence of such forces in campaigns of political destabilisation through the media, of political assassinations, of financial speculation, and even of political crises? Why, for instance, did the Communist coup against Gorbachev fail in August 1991? A coup that was prepared by the chief of the KGB, the Defense Minister, the Central Committee of the CPSU, and almost the entire Government of the Soviet Union? How could it be that, after the failure of the coup, when the democrats came to power in January 1992, almost all the international funds of the secret accounts of the CPSU had vanished? How suddenly, did an aggressive brand of Russian capitalism appear *ipso facto* on the scene, often backed by various brands of ruthless Mafias? Why was the Judge Falcone murdered in Sicily, after having escaped many assassination attempts, precisely at the time when he was investigating the connection between the Sicilian and the Russian Mafia?

In today's criminal economy there are mafias and business interests from all countries (Colombian cartels being in fact the scapegoats, much less important today than the Mexican or American cartels). They work on all profitable criminal trades: drugs, weapons, uranium, strategic metals, nuclear technology, biological warfare, women, children, human organs, the whole system depending upon their capacity of assuring money laundering and political protection, that is from their capacity to penetrate deeply into financial institutions and state apparatuses. Whoever ignores this reality is unable to understand the world we are living in. Seen from this perspective, postmodern vagaries are a sinister joke.

Q: *Manuel, there are obviously serious economic and political issues raised by these events, but we are concerned with urban development.*

What direct impact do you think organised crime will have on the development of cities in particular?

Castells: The most direct relationship between the criminal economy and urban development is the massive process of money laundering through speculative real estate, the source of instability of real estate markets in urban centers around the world, inducing sudden transformations of urban form without regard to the conditions of the local society or even of the economy. Visit Miami, and Florida in general, and you will understand with your eyes!

Q: *In *The Informational City* you suggest that one of the major features of organisational change, that of flexible production, enormously increases the capacity of individual firms and the system of production as a whole. At the same time however, it also undermines the collective status of labour with respect to capital, since employment certainty for the working class is even more transient, ephemeral and unstable. While you do not elaborate on this point, what political significance do you attach to this situation?*

Castells: The real transformation of capitalism is flexibility. Of everything, from the network enterprise (networking forms of organisation) to flexible, unprotected labor, to a constant variable geometry of capital, management, and production. To be sure, there are mass production forms of work and industrial organisation, as most of labor was employed in craft production and agricultural labor at the dawn of the industrial age. But the new world, and the most dynamic, dominant segments of the economy are already organised around the flexible mode. Whoever does not follow it will be wiped out by competition in a globally interdependent system.

Q: *To what extent do you agree with David Harvey when he says that "there is an acute danger of exaggerating the significance of any trend towards increasing flexibility and geographical mobility, blinding us to how strongly implanted Fordist production systems are?"*

Castells: The issue is not to resist information-technology based flexibility (it would be like resisting industrial machinism in the 19th century), but to reconstruct social institutions, and defence systems for

workers and people that take into consideration the new work system. It is the search for what I called "sustainable flexibility". Martin Carnoy and myself are working in designing policies along these lines. And guess what, - we have rediscovered the potential of the family, although we still to have to work out what it could be - a post-patriarchal family, the only one that could exist in our societies (women will not let the reproduction of the old order happen, this is the weak point of conservative schemes).

Q: *Turning to the impact of the new informational technologies on urban development, David Harvey also suggests in 'The Condition of Postmodernity' that overall conflict is inter-urban where some cities adapt and become successful through specialisation, and the rest exist in what he calls "a sea of decay". In contrast you suggest, at least in regard to the American experience, that "the process of uneven restructuring within regions and cities also eases disparity within areas rather than among areas....growing regional homogenisation with increasing intra metropolitan inequality" How should we reconcile these two viewpoints?*

Castells: Regional theories based on uneven regional development are obsolete empirically and politically irrelevant. "Spatial divisions of labor" à la Doreen Massey, is the repetition of the obvious. The problem is that this form of interpretation is a thirty years old banality that does not correspond to the issues of our society. What is critical now is the coexistence in the same metropolitan and regional territory of economic, social, and cultural forms, that pertain to different systems and to different logics, and that coexist very uneasily, some times going to the extreme of mutual ignorance (eg. the South Bronx and Central Manhattan in New York). Social, technological, and economic dualism within the city and within the region is the most important form of spatial differentiation. Valuable spaces are segmented and abstracted from their hinterland, and networked globally, while devalued spaces (where most people live) are isolated in their localities. This is the starting point of new regional theory, as represented by authors such as Phil Cooke, Anna Saxenian and Michael Storper.

Q: *Manuel, recently I discovered three tapes of lectures you gave when you were in Hong Kong exactly ten years ago, and I have been*

listening to them once again. They are extremely interesting given the developments of the last decade. Beginning with the Nanterre uprising in Paris in 1968 - which I assume only coincidentally related to the publication of Henri Lefebvre's The Right To The City and your own classic piece Is There an Urban Sociology? - you illustrate the social dynamics which gave rise to what is now called The "New Urban Studies" which you described then as "not a theory or even a movement or even a group of people". In what sense can one consider that the New Urban Studies has developed since that time?

Castells: The "new urban studies" of the 1970s did represent a breakthrough in urban research, even if they did not have a unified theory, and even less an institutional expression. But they introduced politics to the core of urban theory, and this very movement transformed the field. Foucault, and his urban disciples, raised extremely important issues, especially the specificity of domination processes as embedded in the logic of apparatuses, and the transmission of such domination via culture. Yet, by abstracting such theory from all political economy (an understandable reaction against Marxist economism) they could not reach out to the foundations of a general theory. They ignored the issues posed by the revolution in information technology at the very moment that such a revolution was happening (maybe David Lyon will be able to follow up the Foucaultian perspective on the information society - a welcome move, in spite of my disagreement). And furthermore, they made it impossible to think about resistance and social movements in such a closed system. To some extent, I would consider Foucault to be the last of the great functionalist thinkers - a mode of thinking which is truly obsolete in the age of flexibility.

Q: *In this regard Foucault's position claims that the repression by institutions is even more fundamental than economic exploitation. In reference to this idea you argued (using a wonderful and quite unforgettable phrase) that capital does not act as a benevolent institution - "they are providing you service and swallowing your mind". Presumably this situation is becoming more acute as commodity production increasingly penetrates daily life. On reflection, has this situation got better or worse?*

Castells: There is a differential movement in our system built around flows and networks. On the one hand, everything that is, or could become, valuable has been commodified and *digitised*, transformed into light speed transmissible bits of exchange value. On the other hand, whatever is not valuable enough in each time/spatial context, is devalued, then sent into a lower category of commodification, until the last layer, the remnants, are abandoned to their material being, so that use value, pure use value, becomes increasingly residual. It is exactly because of this that the struggle for use value (e.g. meaning, as in pure architectural beauty) is much more fundamental today than the claims for a share of commodified exchange value, although economic struggles remain indispensable to people's lives.

Q: *Is the commodity becoming, as George Lukacs suggested in History and Class Consciousness, the universal category of society as a whole?*

Castells: As for the commodity dominating the world, this is true and unimportant. Because the commodity has been a central category of our society for the last 100 years at least, and yet there are very different social forms and processes. So what is truly relevant is to understand which form of commodity, how it is produced, how it is consumed, how it is enforced, how and why it is resisted etc. Analysis of our system as "capitalist" is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its understanding. Some people enjoy repeating the old lines, most of them still appropriate. I am focused in discovering the new social logics of domination and change, a more risky form of thinking, necessarily messy, since we have to muddle through the new history making. But elegant coherent models often required a dead corpus of observation. I prefer to unearth life.

Q: *I know from previous discussions that, apart from your own work in urban development, you are also interested in the form of cities and in new developments in architecture, both in sociological as well as formal terms. In this regard you have suggested that along with the raw power and essential 'placelessness' of the international economy, the local state is seriously in danger of completely disappearing unless democratic processes can be strengthened and local identities*

reinforced. What is the place of architecture and urban design in all of this?

Castells: I have said and written repeatedly in the last three years that architecture and design are fundamental trenches of cultural resistance and change in our age. This is because the materiality of domination of the new informational/capitalist system is organised in a space of flows, a space that connects valuable nodes in the planet and abstracts them from their cultural and historical roots, as well as from the democratic mechanisms of social control. Postmodern architecture is the architecture of the space of flows, because only at the end of history, and without reference to any culture or meaning, can you mix all the codes and forms, playing with historic irony.

On the other hand, the reconstruction of meaning in specific locales, meaning linked to the place, resisting the flow, requires an architecture that dares to say something. Not as a cultural pastiche of reinvented popular tradition (this in fact would be Disneyland architecture), but as the expression of new meaning. Sometimes architectural interventions do not consist in providing new codes, but in revealing the emptiness of the message. For instance, Bofill's new Barcelona airport is a beautiful example of what I call "the architecture of nudity". Diaphanous forms, escaping from all meaning: you are in a node of the space of flows, and you have to face your anxiety and your insecurity: you are in the hands of Iberia airlines and there is no escape. Revealing your truth may be a form of meaning in the age of generalised fake.

Q: *Recently I came across a paper you delivered to the ACSP Annual meeting in Austin (1990) called The World has Changed - Can Planning Change? where you talk about the development of urban planning in relation to the spatial logic of multinational corporations and what you term the space of flows. Here you contrast the essential placelessness of the new organisational system against the fact that "personal experience, historical memory and cultural identity are still place rooted". Do you consider that the four intellectual models of planning you mention (social reform via public sector or non profit sector intervention : land use regulation : the urban design tradition : and planning as utopia) have any relevance today? It seems to me that planning has to build its agendas on the feminist and environmental*

agendas, and to a certain extent on a new approach to culture based on the rejection of a wholly commodified lifestyle.

Castells: We must invent new forms of social change in the age of information and global flexibility. For the first time in history the system does not need us. We are all replaceable, and the unskilled are disposable. How do you fight such a system? This time, it will not be from the inside, but from the outside. Space is the fundamental dimension of the struggle, as time (history making) used to be in previous societies. The counter-offensive has to come from the locales, from local communes, building meaningful societies, and then connecting to each other on real time, electronically. The internet could be an instrument of liberation but, as in any technology, its uses will depend on power struggles and intelligent decisions by the actors of social change. Feminism? Environmentalism? Ethnic identity? Of course, these are fundamental sources of social change, but the methodology of their revolt is increasingly obsolete. The issue for women now is how to go from the current destruction of the patriarchal family (which by and large is finished culturally in advanced societies) to the reconstruction of new forms of relationship between men, women, and children. (Spain is fast regressing in its biological reproduction: they are 40 million Spaniards now, there will be 29 million in the year 2050). The threat here of course is that the age of flexibility might extend to laboratory production of children and individually assumed reproduction of the species, something which is not necessarily a science fiction scenario.

Q: *You have written elsewhere that planning is attempting to reconstruct itself intellectually from urban design strategies which you suggest composed of "standardised - destandardised postmodern architecture, apolitical utopia and a methodological emphasis on some limited technical functions". Is this a serious change or merely business as usual?*

Castells: To be clear, beyond academic diplomacy, planning must be reconstructed around physical planning. The defense of the locales, of their meaning, of their uses, is the banner of use value versus exchange value. Economic planning, real estate, and transportation engineering are the instruments of adaptation to the space of flows. In the middle,

sociologists and other social scientists have to choose between meaning and function, that is between places and flows in our context. I have chosen places, although my research focuses on flows, because this is where the power is. And space, all over history, has been organized around power. Indeed power is organised today in and by the space of flows.

Q: *What are the implications of this for the education of urban planners and for the design of the built environment as a whole?*

Castells: Planning can contribute to the new world by making new spaces, meaningful places with connecting capability. As for the education of planners, the main issue is to shift from specialisation to generality. We need flexible planners able to reprogram themselves and their skills every five years. Most planning schools are obsolete, entrenched in second class economics and land use regulations. Indeed, urban designers seem to be the most innovative component in the planning field. They understand that new physical forms have to be created in a world of growing abstraction. Interneting from the Piazza Navona seems to be the way of the future. The problem is that the core of production will be probably between Kaoshiung and Guangzhou. Which will be the Piazza Navonas of the Zhujiang Delta?

Q: *Finally, I know from my own writing that the things which satisfy me in my own work are not necessarily those accepted by "the public gaze". For example, in looking back at your phenomenal output over the last thirty years, I always feel drawn to the 1975 afterword to 'The Urban Question' as a particularly lucid piece of writing. Given the historical conditions under which your various books and papers were written, which of these do you feel most satisfied with?*

Castells: I suppose all authors are enamoured with their last or current book. But in my case I think it is even more so. In the book I am writing, I am addressing everything I have worked on, trying to make it into a coherent work, and aiming at providing intellectual meaning for the overall transformation of our societies, emphasising plural. It is my intellectual testament, just in case. If I have more time left, I will take a long vacation, and I may even be able to visit the country of my childhood's readings, Australia.

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Book Reviews

EGALITARIANISM

Thompson, Elaine. *Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994. X11 + 283 pp. A\$29.95 cloth ISBN 0 86840 365 2

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

A concern with egalitarianism is a central feature of Australian society but it is fraught with contradictions. How can a widespread belief in 'a fair go' and 'fair shares' co-exist with social structures riddled with racism, sexism and xenophobia? Elaine Thompson's book seeks to unravel this paradox. She does so in a way that blends social history with reflections on the values and limitations of Australian egalitarianism.

Bizarre statements have often been made about this topic, such as the claim by former NSW Premier Robert Askin that "we have no poor people in New South Wales. Nor any very rich people. Ours in a classless society" (p. 251). Thompson's book debunks such mythology. Concurrently she shows what is valuable in the culture and aspirations of egalitarianism as an element underpinning social solidarity and democratic inclinations. 'Mateship' has been one particularly important manifestation, although therein lies much of the connection with sexism, racism and xenophobia. It is a form of egalitarianism which excludes at the same time as it binds.

Thompson examines the historical roots of these biases in the egalitarian tradition. The appalling treatment meted out to the Aboriginal people, particularly the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women, is given particular attention. The policies of 'White Australia' are subjected to critical scrutiny, as are the problems faced by the immigrants from non English-speaking backgrounds. The idea of a single 'Anglo-Celtic' type is shown to be out of kilter with Australian history, partly because it ignores key internal divisions such as that between the Irish Catholics and the Anglo-Protestants, and partly because it ignores the important role played historically by other immigrant groups such as the Chinese.