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Postindustrialism

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Technological advances in the 19th and 20th centuries gave rise to industrialism and improved the overall quality of life in the United States and most of Europe. With the general rise in income came an increasing demand for services to sustain this higher standard of living: improved education, leisure activities, entertainment, health care, and information provision. However, many of these new services, unlike a majority of manual tasks in agriculture or industry, could not be mechanized. Because these tasks were more complicated to reproduce and often required more education, service industry workers became much sought after, more of a commodity than industrial or agrarian laborers and more expensive to employ. This shift from industrial, manual labor to a service-focused industry centered on the distribution and production of information is often referred to as “postindustrialization.”

The Rise of the Postindustrialist Society

Sociologist Daniel Bell was one of the first to develop the idea of the postindustrial society. In his book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973), Bell suggested that the postindustrial society—the information society—is not merely characterized by a shift from goods- to knowledge-based industry, but particularly by the nature of this knowledge. The transformation of an industrial to a postindustrial or information society is accompanied by, if not caused by, an increasing dominance of scientific rationality in the political, economic, and social spheres. In industrial societies, most people are involved with the production of material, tangible goods. The postindustrial society, on the other hand, is led forward by information, [p. 694 ↓] knowledge, and services. It is also dominated by science-based industries. Subsequently, the “old” industrial elites gradually yield to “new” technical elites whose human capital—their technological and scientific knowledge—places them at the top of the restructured social and economic hierarchy. While industrialization systematically kept certain segments of society in marginal positions to maximize profits, the postindustrial society emphasizes educational achievement for transcending social boundaries and leveling the social playing field. Supposedly, the new nature of capital would thus give everyone equal opportunities to benefit financially from the opportunities information and technology development provide.

Some scholars, convinced of the egalitarian powers of the postindustrial society, view the social, cultural, political, and economic effects of postindustrialism within Utopian or dystopian perspectives. They suggest that the emphasis on merit, information, and technological development will eventually level the social and economic playing fields. Furthermore, they argue that the postindustrial society's reliance on human rather than nonrenewable natural capital places less pressure on the world's natural resources and is, therefore, much more environment-friendly than its predecessor.

Others believe that the leveling powers of the information society are exaggerated, even elevated to mythical levels. They think the intellectual (educational) demands necessary to be competitive in the information society—paired with a decreasing demand for manual industrial labor—put historically marginalized groups at an unbridgeable social disadvantage. Given the inherently capitalist nature of society, postindustrialism may improve the overall standard of living for the working and middle classes, they maintain, but for those at the top end of society, this will occur at a much greater rate. The gap between the lower and upper classes will thus actually increase. Furthermore, critics note that instead of relieving some of the damaging effects of industrialization on the environment and its resources, postindustrialism places different yet additional pressures on it.

Most Western societies are currently in or working toward postindustrialization, leading to a gradual realization that such Utopian views of the postindustrial society are erroneous or, at least, too optimistic. Studies show that, often, historical economic and cultural privileges give industrial elites and those who benefit from industrialization the necessary human capital to take the lead in the developing information and service industries. Many of those who benefited the least from industrialization continue to face institutional roadblocks that hinder the necessary intellectual and technological development necessary to compete successfully in the new information society. It would appear that Utopian views of postindustrialism falsely assumed that the information-based capitalist system is inherently different from, or not as competitive as, industrial capitalism.

The speed with which advances in information technology are taking place suggest that only those with the necessary intellectual and financial resources are able to keep or catch up with those already involved in the industry. Furthermore, inequality

in educational resources available for students in the West, particularly in the United States, indicates that, as long as social class influences educational opportunity, the democratizing forces of the information society are limited. On a global scale, the growing (economic) dominance of information technology, and thus of educational achievement, means that the divide between rich and poor countries may widen further in years to come, making it increasingly difficult for industrial societies to catch up with those in postindustrialization or already postindustrial.

Finally, while some scholars maintain that service industries place less pressure on natural resources and are much more environment-friendly than their predecessors, the increasing standards of living in postindustrial societies have also led to an increase in waste that food and restaurant businesses produce or else do little to decrease their reliance on oil. In fact, increasing standards of living also increase demand for material goods, continuing to strain natural resources all over the world. In theory, the democratizing forces of the postindustrial, information society seem promising, though in practice, it would appear that postindustrialization in most societies has yet to effectively diminish socioeconomic inequality.

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See also

Further Readings

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