

## THE SUREST WAY TO MAKE A MISTAKE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Japanisation, the end of work, globalisation,  
the new economy, networked societies, etc.

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The past decade has been a veritable breeding ground for visions of the future, whether the inevitable diffusion of the so-called Japanese model, the widely proclaimed end of work, the irreversibility of globalisation or else the advent of a new era of prosperity thanks to the “new economy”. The latest of these perspectives is one by Manuel Castells, who predicts that societies might very well be re-building themselves into networks, with a great deal of help from (and maybe even thanks to) the Internet.

The problem is that despite their different and even contrasting attributes, predictions of this sort always reproduce the same types of errors yet never learn from their mistakes. The repetition is bothersome, and it merits explanation.

It is true that the theorisations that we are lampooning here have sometimes served as useful “punching balls” for researchers seeking more conceptual rigour. Nevertheless, a great deal of time has been lost trying to refute such ideas. Moreover, even before such refutations are entirely completed, the theorisation is already being contradicted by unexpected occurrences in the real world – before being immediately replaced by other theorisations that are riddled with the same defects. To cope with these notions, we are forced to undertake a Sisyphean struggle, and this prevents us from nurturing and sustaining other more highly evolved approaches and theories in public discussions and on the academic scene.

**There are so many good reasons to make a mistake in social sciences that there is no need to add any bad ones**

Let’s remember a few mundane truths. Science only progresses when people come up with hypotheses and build intellectual tools and concepts that are coherent with them, in order to test both their fertility and limitations. This is a collective effort whose purpose is to enhance our understanding of the situations we face. Nothing is more sterile than to constantly procrastinate taking the intellectual risk that consists of offering explanations and outlining possible futures, under the pretext that no complete information is available

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and that we should not be making any speculation if we are not absolutely sure of ourselves. A theory is nothing other than a toolbox - it is not a new truth. Without taking theoretical risks, without asking the questions that spring from the hypotheses we have made, without the problems that are caused by our use of concepts that can be derived from situations that may be quite different from the ones we are actually analysing - no research would ever take place, nor would any usable information ever become available.

Fear of drawing conclusions from research, and of using them as a basis for new thinking, leaves the field open for headline-seeking pundits who will then find it all the easier to surf on the waves of skin-deep truisms, constantly renewing their so-called exploits by unashamedly and inexplicably changing their position so that it always remains in tune with current fashion. Every researcher is well aware of the fact that the affirmation that s/he should be making as rigorously as possible will never be anything other than an approximation (something that is at best slightly better than what is already available) or a representation (something that is at best capable of illuminating reality slightly better than this has been done so far). As we all know, it is simply impossible to identify all of the conditions in which a given affirmation can be validated, even if we were to assimilate all of the knowledge in the world, and regardless of whether this affirmation pertains to physical or else to social phenomena. The inaccessibility of truth means that just one thing is certain - we are always going to make mistakes. It may be possible to demonstrate that one affirmation is false, but this does not mean we can prove that another one is "true". At best it can only be less false, or possibly more true, whichever suits.

If this search without illusions is not to deprive us of all hope, and if (as far as this is possible) it is destined to have a cumulative effect that might culminate in our having a somewhat wider understanding of the world we live in, we will need to avoid applying the same approach time and time again (thus reproducing the same types of errors that this approach has induced) without learning anything from it. Yet what we have witnessed so far, for far too many years now, is exactly this type of repetition.

### **A three-part waltz: spectacular success; sudden doubt; and sudden discarding - before the dance starts all over again**

A few examples from the decade that has just come to an end suffice for our present purposes: "lean production"; the end of work; globalisation; the new economy; and the networked society.

In 1990, researchers from MIT announced the emergence of a new productive model they called lean production, one that had allegedly been invented by the Japanese (Womack et.al., 1990). This was supposed to replace the Taylorian-Fordian model, its so-called predecessor which was deemed to have been responsible for the crises of work and productivity that had marked the 1970s. The model's adoption by all firms all across the planet was presented as a pre-condition for surviving the Japanese onslaught and for reviving the global economy. Despite a number of unlikely premises, this thesis became an international success in both managerial and academic circles. Yet just few years on, it had already become clear that "the system that was supposed to change the world" was not able

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to pull the country that had allegedly given birth to it, Japan, out of the dire economic straits in which it found itself. “Lean production” had had problems from the very outset of the worldwide revolution that it was supposed to have engendered. Moreover, it later became just as clear that Japanese companies could be just as different from one another as firms in any other country are. And much later, we learned that the firm that had best embodied “lean production”, Toyota, was going through a serious crisis of work that forced it to make substantial and durable changes in its production system, even as the system to which it had given its name was being presented as the productive model for the 21st century.

For certain sociologists, the “end of work” was the same thing as “lean production” had been for researchers in management – a thesis that was created a surprise and a great deal of enthusiasm, and which was corroborated by seemingly indisputable facts. Moreover, it seemed to situate their discipline at the very heart of general societal evolution. The new technologies and a mass unemployment that had become structural in nature signified the end of societies that were based upon the value of work, thus making it possible to fulfil people’s aspirations for other forms of wealth and for other types of social relationships (Méda, 1995; Rifkin, 1996). Economic recovery, major differences in the employment situation from one country to the next, capitalism’s manifest ability to invest new fields of activity (that had up until now been deemed to lie outside of the economic sphere) and thus to generate new jobs - all of these factors contributed to putting these values on the back burner.

The globalisation thesis has also been seriously undermined. This is less the result of research efforts that have demonstrated that this mode of international organisation is far from having been implemented in its entirety, and that it still remains quite reversible (Boyer, Souyri, 2001), and more the result of three spectacular refutals of the thesis itself: the “emerging” country crisis; the many failed corporate mega-mergers; and the implosion of the “new economy”. The first argument to be advanced was that the so-called “emerging” countries would rapidly accede to a better standard of living, thanks to economic liberalisation and the opening up of the world market. A fourth world pole was supposedly being born and providing a new impetus, thus counteracting the fact that consumption in the Triad countries was losing steam as a driver of growth. Knowledgeable publications did not fail to defend this perspective, despite the absence of any analysis of the reasons underlying the variability of the conditions and circumstances that were associated with the spectacular growth rates being witnessed. The Asian crisis and its contagion to other East European and Latin American countries was a sudden reality check. Occasional double-digit growth in many of these countries was based on an indebtedness that was much too high and quite out of control. Investors withdrew from these regions as rapidly as they had entered them. Moreover, the time when some of these countries could export their goods to the industrialised world (notably the United States) without importing anything in return came to an end with the Communist regimes’ implosion, meaning that they no longer benefited from the same facilities as before. Mega-mergers or global alliances between big firms (something that was facilitated by the previous crisis) became the new credo. However it soon became apparent that these operations were not

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automatically destined to be successful, and that they could not dictate the macroeconomic and societal conditions that were necessary if they were to become profitable.

Shirking any consideration of people's satisfactions and fears, this notion faded away, to be replaced by a new faith in the power of finance. Having retrieved its freedom of movement and investment since the late 1980s, the idea here was that finance could not help but engender a generalised deregulation of trade as well as a progressive global homogenisation of the conditions of production and consumption. Moreover, since institutional shareholders' rising power intimated the need to achieve higher returns on invested capital, this would help to accelerate the adoption of "best practices" and promote investment in the sectors with the brightest prospects for the future. Proof for this was supposedly provided by the impetuous development and high returns of the new ICT sector; by uninterrupted American growth; and by the "disappearance" of unemployment in Great Britain. Forgotten was the irresistible diffusion of the Japanese model - from now on, the "new economy" and the Anglo-American model that had sired it would inevitably sweep everything away in front of it. Yet the bursting of what would turn out to have mostly been just another speculative bubble brought the economic growth of the late 1990s back to proportions that were historically and geographically more sensible (Artus, 2001).

The sociologist Manuel Castells could not approve of a technological and economic determinism that was as sterile as these earlier notions had been. He was however of the opinion that the spectacular development of ICT constituted a major event, and he therefore predicted the possible advent of a world that would be organised into trading networks which were equal to one another and depended on each participant's affinities and interests, thus short-circuiting traditional territorially-based hierarchies (Castells, 2000). The driver or the vector for this shift (it is not always clear which one Castells uses) was supposed to be the Internet, which by its very nature lies outside of any conceivable control and limitation, especially since it was originally designed with this very purpose in mind. However, the 11th of September has dampened many people's ardour, including Manuel Castells's. No more than the telephone, radio or television once upon a time, the Internet (neither in its tangible conception, nor in its usage) cannot exist totally outside of dominant social relationships that, to be brief, include capital requirements and State control. Infrastructure, access costs, profitability requirements and national and international regulations – all of these factors reduce the possibility of everyone being able to communicate with everyone. Plus it is not even certain that this would be sufficient for a society to be structured into networks. It is not enough to affirm that the Internet is a product of a culture (a Western one that dominates the rest of the world nowadays) to avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism. Since techniques are social products, we must reconstitute their origins and evolution with great care if we are to understand the issues upon which they have a direct effect..

### **The tireless application, time and time again, of the same approach: transforming seemingly convergent facts into a universal trend that resolves major social contradictions**

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Despite their different contents and levels of sophistication, these theoretical “bubbles” are the product of one and the same intellectual approach.

The first phases of this approach consists of regrouping facts by their resemblance to one another or by their apparent convergence, and then presenting them as if they were radically new trends. This is how lean production was theorised, for example, with a selection having been made of those practices and mechanisms that appeared to constitute a breakaway from the so-called Taylorian-Fordian model, and examples being drawn from different Japanese firms. The general preconception was that the attributes which had been selected indisputably indicated that just the one single model was in effect. As for any other characteristics, they were simply neglected or ignored. The appearance in American or European firms of some of the attributes that had been selected, such as groupwork, was depicted as proof of such firms’ “Japanisation”. More detailed analyses would show that the origins and substance of these apparently shared attributes were in fact very different from one another. Similarly, the rapid development of new labour-saving technologies and the simultaneous persistence of mass unemployment were both interpreted as manifestations of a structurally irreversible reduction in globally required working times. Yet this conjunction had already been observed on several occasions since the birth of capitalism, without work ever having lost its centrality in social life. The influx of capital, increased exports and high growth rates were portrayed as if they were the expression of the emerging countries’ definitive takeoff, without anyone having made an effort to recall that the possible sources of growth for such countries were really quite divergent, and that their prevalent forms of national income distribution had prevented, with just a few exceptions, a virtuous circle of durable growth from ever taking off. Forgotten were notorious examples such as Argentina which has never stopped “emerging” for more than a century now, and which inexorably plunges back into crisis. Mega-mergers or corporate alliances were celebrated as if they represented the advent of a world on a path towards unification, even though this analysis neglected both the very restrictive conditions in which such regroupings could be successful and also the re-heterogenisation processes that have been breaking out all across the world space.

The next phase in this approach involved demonstrating that the new trend was capable, if it were allowed to generalise, of resolving some contradiction or major problem that had been polarising public debate and worrying a very large number of people. By getting employees involved in the resolution of production problems, lean production was (according to its proponents) going to solve both the crisis in work and also the crisis of productivity that had been spawned by the so-called Taylorian-Fordian model. The new technologies would lead to a major reduction in the time needed to produce whatever goods were considered necessary, and a judicious distribution of any residual work (and of the fruits thereof) would eliminate unemployment and underemployment. The failure of “development policies”, stagnation in those countries in which the economy was State-regulated, the “success” of those countries that had deregulated their labour markets and capital markets plus the rise of the “new economy” - all of these factors were supposed to open the door to a new era of global prosperity, after so many years of crisis and frustration.

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The third phase, ostensibly the most delicate one, is the demonstration that the concept in the spotlight cannot help but disseminate and generalise, thereby providing a real resolution of whatever problem it is that is worrying the entire planet. Curiously, it is the point that is the least well argued that the reader is asked to adhere to without too many questions being raised. Since no demonstration can prove without a shadow of a doubt the fulfilment of any of the predictions made regarding the fields we are considering, to eliminate all doubts the thesis's proponents explicitly, surreptitiously or unconsciously evoke "self-evident truths", which are in fact notions that have been drawn from a shared ideological source. For example, the argument runs that since lean production provides superior results and because the world market has become an extremely competitive place, firms that are not Japanese in origin nevertheless have no choice but to adopt the country's system as rapidly as possible, if they want to survive. And since previous industrial history is deemed to have gone through two stages (quasi-craft production and mass production, each corresponding to a specific type of demand and workforce), it is logical that a third phase has now arisen, one that is a synthesis of its two predecessors, to wit, one that combines a cheap production by a trained and responsible workforce of customised products for increasingly demanding customers. Work is an age-old curse and/or a regrettable invention that thankfully requires less and less time thanks to the new technologies, and as such it cannot help but lose its centrality. Underemployment and structural mass unemployment, which have become socially unacceptable and economically counterproductive, have no other choice in the long run but to distribute amongst all actors whatever residual work remains, turning work into a peripheral aspect of anyone's life. A totally new world thus becomes feasible. The deregulation of trade, the free circulation of capital and the dissemination of technological resources (thanks in particular to mega-mergers and to productive internationalisation) cannot help but bring about generalised growth, a homogenisation of working conditions and a transcendence of national rivalries. It achieves this by creating a win-win situation in which individual and national interests are interdependent. The Anglo-American model, by broadly disseminating the ownership of capital throughout the population and by restoring shareholders' legitimate power to run firms as they see fit, cannot help but galvanise the global economy by giving a starring role to those spaces and sectors that are the most profitable of all, and by forcing all the others to reform themselves. The contradiction between employees and shareholders is supposedly resolved by a merging of these two categories. ICT will enable people (when they so desire) to enter into contact with others who share their interests and aspirations, something that in this view cannot help but increase the number of transversal networks and free everyone from all control and hierarchy.

The fourth phase is a commonplace but not absolutely indispensable one. Having pretended that no uncertainty, contradiction and/or conflict exists (or else having relativised the impact thereof), it becomes possible to list all of the felicitous changes that the universalised process on offer will engender in all areas of social life. The most lucid essayists and researchers stay well away from acting in this manner, but even so, such behaviour does not necessarily compromise one's scientific reputation. This is why the

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proponents of lean production allowed themselves to write, without joking about it or trying to make anyone else laugh, that this system was going to change the world by restoring meaning to work, performance to firms, growth to nations and peace to the Earth.

The final phases, which generally take on the form of a new book, consists of presenting (before current events actually undermine the new model or before the public loses interest in it) any reality gap as if it were the outcome of any one of the following alternatives: secondary factors; yesterday's battles; or the learning that needs to take place if the new principles are to be properly understood and applied.

### **A battle cry in favour of substantive, historical and analytical approaches**

Several conclusions can be derived from past refutals of universalist theses (and from attempts to replace them with approaches that are more rigorous in nature).

When faced with a phenomenon that seems novel, three research operations would seem to be indispensable. The first consists of contextualising facts that could otherwise be deemed to comprise a (new) trend by examining them in the light of the history of the concrete entity to which each refers (such and such an individual, group, institution, society, etc.) so as to understand their meaning and thus verify whether their aggregation would be a legitimate endeavour. The second involves establishing via comparison and reasoning which pre-conditions will render the facts that have been regrouped or selected feasible and viable. The third is to conceptualise them in such a way as to replace the shared, spontaneous or pseudo-knowledgeable representation with one that is more illustrative and operative in nature.

The first operation is of course the decisive one. This is because similar facts can have different meanings, and different facts can have the same meaning. New facts do not necessarily refer to a new reality and inversely old facts can be instruments of change. The meaning of a fact can only be detected by looking at the historical conditions that presided over its appearance and development. The meaning of a practice or action mechanism can only be understood in terms of the problem that it is supposed to resolve. In short, it is only by reconstituting the "trajectory" of an individual, group, institution or society that is possible to move any closer to the real meaning of the accompanying facts, practices, systems and discourses (and to the apprehend the substantial diversity thereof). This is how it has been possible to demonstrate not only that groupwork is not a Japanese specificity (Durand et al., 1999) but instead that it also has an entirely different meaning for two of that country's own carmakers, Toyota and Honda, and that it refers to productive models that contrast with one another on many a point (Boyer, Freyssenet, 2000b). The goal at Toyota was to reduce standard times as part of a permanent reduction in costs strategy, whereas at Honda it was to facilitate a rapid reconversion of the production tool within the framework of a strategy combining innovation and flexibility. In the end, lean production turned out to be an unjustified and contradictory amalgamation of the two productive models that these two firms had devised. Similarly, announcements made regarding the putative end of work should have indicate that the genesis of this phenomenon had already been analysed (that is, unless we are to believe in the fable that humanity has been

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progressively freeing itself, through blood and tears, from its animalistic nature, and from need in general). Yet further investigation into this topic offers few surprises. Activities ostensibly similar to that which we now call work (deemed by some to be a recent concept and reality that first appeared in Europe in the 18th-century) were clearly present in other societies in earlier times - when they had a very different meaning. Work will only lose its central role and disappear the day when the social relationship that gives birth to it is marginalised or eliminated (Freysenet, 1999). Analysis of the process by which one particular social relationship ends up dominating all others remains largely unexplored. And yet, this study is a mandatory point of passage if we are to understand the conditions heralding the end of work.

In reality, all phenomena possess conditions of enactment and viability that circumscribe the possibility they may emerge, be diffused, evolve, disappear and be revived. Updating such conditions is the second operation that we absolutely have to undertake if we are to have any chance of coming up with evolutionary scenarios that are even the slightest bit relevant or useful. This can be achieved through comparison and reasoning, as demonstrated by the work the GERPISA has accomplished (Boyer, Freysenet, 2000b, 2001). Once we are able to distinguish between productive models with similar levels of performance, we can conduct these two operations in parallel, the goal being to determine the conditions in which the models become both feasible and viable. This involves a logical examination of the macro and micro-conditions that each requires so that the profit strategy it implements becomes suitable; and so that the means it uses are imbued with coherency. It also involves comparing the environments in which each model has appeared, developed or been successfully transplanted. For example, an approach of this sort can explain the appearance of the "Sloanian" model, which pursues a profit strategy that combines economies of scale and diversity thanks to a commonalisation of the invisible parts of products that are only differentiated from one another at a surface level. Note that it has been said that this model is passé since it is not adapted to the market and labour conditions that have supposedly been in place since the 1970s - whereas in reality, it has always been feasible and viable in a product renewal type of market, as long as three conditions are fulfilled: the market remains moderately hierarchical thanks to a national distribution of income that curbs inequalities; the various firms involved jointly manufacture or purchase the largest possible number of shared parts; and the employment relationship emphasises jobs and professional mobility as opposed to wage levels, as shown by the example of Volkswagen. On the other hand the Toyotian model ultimately required (if it was to have any hope of becoming both feasible and viable) conditions that were highly restrictive and which considerably limited its dissemination and durability - something that contradicted the affirmation of lean production's universal applicability, which supposedly conceptualise the Toyota (and in general, all Japanese firms') production system.

If this latter model is to survive, based as it is on employees' and suppliers' participation in a permanent reduction of standard times and on a respect for production planning in all circumstances, it demands amongst other things that employees and suppliers continue to be satisfied with whatever advantages they have negotiated: an employment and career guarantee for the former; guaranteed orders and profits for the latter. These advantages,

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albeit significant, nevertheless require (if they are to become acceptable) that the workforce and that subcontractors be directly subjected to an external competitiveness constraint; that the national currency's exchange rate remain under governmental control; that the labour market dissuade employees from changing firms; and that work conditions remain acceptable. It is because such conditions could no longer fulfilled in the late 1980s that the Toyotian model imploded in 1990 (Shimizu, 1999).

The third operation consists of developing concepts (i.e., analytical tools that are appropriate for the new representation of reality) that make it possible to devise potential evolutionary scenarios, and which test the fertility and limitations of such scenarios by applying them to other situations. For instance, notions such as “national growth mode”, “profit strategy” and “company governance compromise”, concepts we developed in an effort to understand the diversity of the productive models we are dealing with, have allowed us for example to develop reasoned hypotheses regarding the forms that firms' internationalisation drives could take on; the rearrangement of the world space; and the future of the mega-mergers of the late 1990s (Boyer, Freyssenet, 1999, 2000a; Freyssenet, Lung, 2001b).

This approach had led to a paradigm we can call the paradigm of “limited but periodically renewed diversity” within capitalist societies, in lieu of the “one best way” or “one necessary way” paradigms that supposedly applied to each main historical period, and which were analytical filters that at the very best were no more than a retroactive illusion.

### **How to organise a debate between these two types of approaches?**

It is easy to see why it is more difficult to summarise the findings of our approach in a single formula that can cater directly to our social imagination and respond to our concerns. As opposed to the affirmation by some that they will probably be able to solve most major problems, and as opposed to the affirmation by others that crises are unavoidable, the tools we are proposing enhance our overall understanding of the diversity of trajectories, contexts, conditions and possibilities. Our conclusions will not be able to avoid contrasting with (or at the very least undermining) one another, depending on what is happening at a given moment in time. It will certainly be more difficult for the media to pick up on them.

The refutation of universalist theses does not necessarily intimate acknowledgement of a greater relevancy of the analytical tools we are proposing in their place. If one universalist explanation were simply to take the place of another, people's focus and energies would immediately shift directions. This could lead them to blindly defend and/or contest the latest affirmation, thus harming a project whose purpose is to learn lessons from the mistakes that up until now have been repeated time and again.

Should we abandon this endeavour and seek shelter in the discrete and comfortable surroundings of other insiders? Probably not - but of course this raises questions as to what it is that we should be doing. We are starting to learn from the sociology of science how debates and/or scientific legitimacies are formulated. The problem with this is that once again, there is no “one best way”. It is likely that potential new paths are waiting to be

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invented, directions that mesh better with the types of social relationship that we would welcome in research and in other fields of endeavour (Freysenet, 2001a).

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