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052131349X - The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to

A. D. 1760, Volume I

Michael Mann

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## The sources of social power

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### VOLUME I

A history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760

This is the first part of a three-volume work on the nature of power in human societies. In it, Michael Mann identifies the four principal “sources” of power as being control over economic, ideological, military, and political resources. He examines the interrelations between these in a narrative history of power from Neolithic times, through ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the classical Mediterranean age, and medieval Europe, up to just before the Industrial Revolution in England. Rejecting the conventional monolithic concept of a “society,” Dr. Mann’s model is instead that of a series of overlapping, intersecting power networks. He makes this model operational by focusing on the logistics of power – how the flow of information, manpower, and goods is controlled over social and geographical space – thereby clarifying many of the “great debates” in sociological theory.

The present volume offers explanations of the emergence of the state and social stratification; of city-states, militaristic empires, and the persistent interaction between them; of the world salvation religions; and of the peculiar dynamism of medieval and early modern Europe. It ends by generalizing about the nature of overall social development, the varying forms of social cohesion, and the role of classes and class struggle in history. Volume II will continue the history of power up to the present, centering on the interrelations of nation-states and social classes. Volume III will present the theoretical conclusions of the whole work.

This ambitious and provocative attempt to provide a new theoretical frame for the interpretation of the history of societies will be challenging and stimulating reading for a wide range of social scientists, historians, and other readers concerned with understanding large-scale social and historical processes.

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VOLUME I

**A history of power from the beginning  
to A.D. 1760**

MICHAEL MANN

*London School of Economics and Political Science*



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## Preface

In 1972, I wrote a paper called “Economic Determinism and Structural Change,” which purported not only to refute Karl Marx and reorganize Max Weber but also to offer the outlines of a better general theory of social stratification and social change. The paper began to develop into a short book. It would contain a general theory supported by a few case studies, including historical ones. Later I decided that the book would set forth a sweeping theory of the world history of power.

But while developing these delusions, I rediscovered the pleasure of devouring history. A ten-year immersion in that subject reinforced the practical empiricism of my background to restore a little respect for the complexity and obduracy of facts. It did not entirely sober me. For I have written this large history of power in agrarian societies, and I will follow it shortly with Volume II, *A History of Power in Industrial Societies*, and Volume III, *A Theory of Power* – even if their central thrust is now modest. But it gave me a sense of the mutual disciplining that sociology and history can exercise on each other.

Sociological theory cannot develop without knowledge of history. Most of the key questions of sociology concern processes occurring through time; social structure is inherited from particular pasts; and a large proportion of our “sample” of complex societies is only available in history. But the study of history is also impoverished without sociology. If historians eschew theory of how societies operate, they imprison themselves in the commonsense notions of their own society. In this volume, I repeatedly question the application of essentially modern notions – such as nation, class, private property, and the centralized state – to earlier historical periods. In most cases, some scholars have anticipated my skepticism. But they could have generally done so earlier and more rigorously had they converted implicit contemporary common sense into explicit, testable theory. Sociological theory can also discipline historians in their selection of facts. We can never be “sufficiently scholarly”: There are more social and historical data than we can digest. A strong sense of theory enables us to decide what might be the key facts, what might be central and what marginal to an understanding of how a particular society works. We select our data, see whether they confirm or reject our theoretical hunches, refine the latter, collect more data, and continue zigzagging across between theory and data until we have established a plausible account of how this society, in this time and place, “works.”

Comte was right in his claim that sociology is the queen of the social and human sciences. But no queen ever worked as hard as the sociologist with

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pretensions needs to! Nor is the creation of historically supported theory nearly as streamlined a process as Comte believed. Zigzagging between theoretical and historical scholarship has unsettling effects. The real world (historical or contemporary) is messy and imperfectly documented; yet theory claims pattern and perfection. The match can never be exact. Too much scholarly attention to the facts makes one blind; too much listening to the rhythms of theory and world history makes one deaf.

So, to preserve my health during this venture, I have depended more than usually on the stimulus and encouragement of sympathetic specialists and fellow zigzagers. My greatest debt is to Ernest Gellner and John Hall. In our "Patterns of History" seminar, held since 1980 at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), we have argued over much of the ground covered by this volume. My thanks go especially to John, who has read virtually all my drafts, commented copiously on them, argued with me all the way, and yet been invariably warm and supportive toward my enterprise. I have also shamelessly exploited the seminar's distinguished visiting speakers, in discussion turning their excellent papers toward my own obsessions, pumping them for ideas and specialist knowledge.

Many scholars commented generously on individual chapters, correcting my howlers, putting me in touch with up-to-date research and controversies in their field, demonstrating that I was wrong, even hoping that I would stay longer in their field and dig deeper. In rough order of their interests as organized by my sequence of chapters, I thank James Woodburn, Stephen Shennan, Colin Renfrew, Nicholas Postgate, Gary Runciman, Keith Hopkins, John Peel, John Parry, Peter Burke, Geoffrey Elton, and Gian Poggi. Anthony Giddens and William H. McNeill read the whole of my penultimate draft and made many sensible criticisms. Over the years, colleagues commented helpfully on my drafts, seminars, and arguments. I would like particularly to thank Keith Hart, David Lockwood, Nicos Mouzelis, Anthony Smith, and Sandy Stewart.

Essex University and LSE students were sympathetic audiences for trying out my general ideas in sociological-theory courses. Both institutions were generous in giving me leave to research and lecture on the material in this book. Seminar series at Yale University, New York University, the Academy of Sciences at Warsaw, and Oslo University gave me extended opportunities to develop my arguments. The Social Science Research Council awarded me a personal research grant for the academic year 1980–1 and was most supportive toward me. In that year I was able to complete most of the historical research necessary for the earlier chapters, which I would not have been able to do easily while carrying a normal teaching load.

Library staff at Essex, the LSE, the British Museum, and the University Library, Cambridge, coped well with my eclectic demands. My secretaries at

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Essex and the LSE – Linda Peachey, Elizabeth O’Leary, and Yvonne Brown – were unfailingly efficient and helpful through all the drafts thrust at them.

Nicky Hart made the breakthrough that reorganized this work into three volumes. Her own work and her presence – together with Louise, Gareth, and Laura – prevented me from being blinded, deafened, or even too obsessed, by this project.

Obviously, the mistakes are mine.