

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Societies as organized power networks

The three projected volumes of this book provide a history and theory of power relations in human societies. That is difficult enough. But a moment's reflection makes it seem even more daunting: For are not a history and theory of power relations likely to be virtually synonymous with a history and theory of human society itself? Indeed they are. To write a general account, however voluminous, of some of the principal patterns to be found in the history of human societies is unfashionable in the late twentieth century. Such grandly generalizing, Victorian ventures – based on imperial pillaging of secondary sources – have been crushed under the twentieth-century weight of massed volumes of scholarship and serried ranks of academic specialists.

My basic justification is that I have arrived at a distinctive, general way of looking at human societies that is at odds with models of society dominant within sociology and historical writing. This chapter explains my approach. Those uninitiated into social-science theory may find parts of it heavy going. If so, *there is an alternative way of reading this volume*. Skip this chapter, go straight to Chapter 2, or indeed to any of the narrative chapters, and continue until you get confused or critical about the terms used or the underlying theoretical drift. Then turn back to this introduction for guidance.

My approach can be summed up in two statements, from which a distinctive methodology flows. The first is: *Societies are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power*. The distinctiveness of my approach will be perceived swiftly if I spend three paragraphs saying what societies are *not*.

Societies are not unitary. They are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities. We can never find a single bounded society in geographical or social space. Because there is no system, no totality, there cannot be “sub-systems,” “dimensions,” or “levels” of such a totality. Because there is no whole, social relations cannot be reduced “ultimately,” “in the last instance,” to some systemic property of it – like the “mode of material production,” or the “cultural” or “normative system,” or the “form of military organization.” Because there is no bounded totality, it is not helpful to divide social change or conflict into “endogenous” and “exogenous” varieties. Because there is no social system, there is no “evolutionary” process within it. Because humanity is not divided into a series of bounded totalities, “diffusion” of social organization does not occur between them. Because there is no totality, individuals are not constrained in their behavior by “social structure as a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 A history of power to A.D. 1760

whole,” and so it is not helpful to make a distinction between “social action” and “social structure.”

I overstated my point in the preceding paragraph for the sake of effect. I will not dispense altogether with these ways of looking at societies. Yet most sociological orthodoxies – such as systems theory, Marxism, structuralism, structural functionalism, normative functionalism, multidimensional theory, evolutionism, diffusionism, and action theory – mar their insights by conceiving of “society” as an unproblematic, unitary totality.

In practice, most accounts influenced by these theories take polities, or *states*, as their “society,” their total unit for analysis. Yet states are only one of the four major types of power network with which I will be dealing. The enormous covert influence of the nation-state of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the human sciences means that a nation-state model dominates sociology and history alike. Where it does not, pride of place is sometimes given among archaeologists and anthropologists to “culture,” but even this is usually conceived of as a single, bounded culture, a kind of “national culture.” True, some modern sociologists and historians reject nation-state models. They equate “society” with transnational economic relations, using either capitalism or industrialism as their master concept. This goes too far in the other direction. State, culture, and economy are all important structuring networks; but they almost never coincide. There is no one master concept or basic unit of “society.” It may seem an odd position for a sociologist to adopt; but if I could, I would abolish the concept of “society” altogether.

The second statement flows from the first. Conceiving of societies as multiple overlapping and intersecting power networks gives us the best available entry into the issue of what is ultimately “primary” or “determining” in societies. *A general account of societies, their structure, and their history can best be given in terms of the interrelations of what I will call the four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political (IEMP) relationships.* These are (1) *overlapping networks of social interaction*, not dimensions, levels, or factors of a single social totality. This follows from my first statement. (2) They are also *organizations, institutional means of attaining human goals*. Their primacy comes not from the strength of human desires for ideological, economic, military, or political satisfaction but from the particular *organizational means* each possesses to attain human goals, whatever these may be. In this chapter I work gradually toward specifying the four organizational means and my IEMP model of organized power.

From this a distinctive methodology will emerge. It is conventional to write of power relations in terms of a rather abstract language, concerning the interrelation of economic, ideological, and political “factors” or “levels” or “dimensions” of social life. I operate at a more concrete, *sociospatial* and *organizational* level of analysis. The central problems concern *organization, control, logistics, communication* – the capacity to organize and control peo-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of
Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Societies as organized power networks

3

ple, materials, and territories, and the development of this capacity throughout history. The four sources of social power offer alternative organizational means of social control. In various times and places each has offered enhanced capacity for organization that has enabled the form of its organization to dictate for a time the form of societies at large. My history of power rests on measuring sociospatial capacity for organization and explaining its development.

That task is made slightly easier by the discontinuous nature of power development. We shall encounter various spurts, attributable to the invention of new organizational techniques that greatly enhanced the capacity to control peoples and territories. A list of some of the more important techniques is given in Chapter 16. When I come across a spurt, I stop the narrative, attempt to measure the enhanced power capacity, and then seek to explain it. Such a view of social development is what Ernest Gellner (1964) calls “neo-episodic.” Fundamental social change occurs, and human capacities are enhanced, through a number of “episodes” of major structural transformation. The episodes are not part of a single immanent process (as in nineteenth-century “World Growth Stories”), but they may have a cumulative impact on society. Thus we can venture toward the issue of ultimate primacy.

Ultimate primacy

Of all the issues raised by sociological theory over the last two centuries, the most basic yet elusive is that of ultimate primacy or determinacy. Are there one or more core, decisive, ultimately determining elements, or keystones, of society? Or are human societies seamless webs spun of endless multicausal interactions in which there are no overall patterns? What are the major dimensions of social stratification? What are the most important determinants of social change? These are the most traditional and taxing of all sociological questions. Even in the loose way in which I have formulated them, they are not the same question. Yet they all raise the same central issue: How can one isolate the “most important” element or elements in human societies?

Many consider no answer possible. They claim that sociology cannot find general laws, or even abstract concepts, applicable in the same way to societies in all times and places. This skeptical empiricism suggests we start more modestly, analyzing specific situations with the intuitive and empathic understanding given by our own social experience, building up to a multicausal explanation.

However, this is not a secure epistemological position. Analysis cannot merely reflect the “facts”; our perception of the facts is ordered by mental concepts and theories. The average empirical historical study contains many implicit assumptions about human nature and society, and commonsense concepts derived from our own social experience – such as “the nation,” “social

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 A history of power to A.D. 1760

class,” “status,” “political power,” “the economy.” Historians get along without examining these assumptions if they are all using the same ones; but as soon as distinctive styles of history emerge – Whig, nationalist, materialist, neoclassical, and so forth – they are in the realm of competing general theories of “how societies work.” But even in the absence of competing assumptions, difficulties arise. Multicausality states that social events or trends have multiple causes. Thus we distort social complexity if we abstract one, or even several, major structural determinants. But we cannot *avoid* doing this. Every analysis selects some but not all prior events as having an effect on subsequent ones. Therefore, everyone operates with some criterion of importance, even if this is rarely made explicit. It can help if we make such criteria explicit from time to time and engage in theory building.

Nevertheless, I take skeptical empiricism seriously. Its principal objection is well founded: Societies are much *messier* than our theories of them. In their more candid moments, systematizers such as Marx and Durkheim admitted this; whereas the greatest sociologist, Weber, devised a methodology (of “ideal-types”) to cope with messiness. I follow Weber’s example. We *can* emerge with a proximate methodology – and perhaps even eventually with a proximate answer – for the issue of ultimate primacy, but only by devising concepts suited to dealing with a mess. This, I claim, is the virtue of a socio-spatial and organizational model of the sources of social power.

Human nature and social power

Let us start with human nature. Human beings are restless, purposive, and rational, striving to increase their enjoyment of the good things of life and capable of choosing and pursuing appropriate means for doing so. Or, at least, enough of them do this to provide the dynamism that is characteristic of human life and gives it a history lacking for other species. These human characteristics are the source of everything described in this book. They are the original source of power.

Because of this, social theorists have always been tempted to proceed a little farther with a *motivational model* of human society, attempting to ground a theory of social structure in the “importance” of the various human motivational drives. This was more popular around the turn of the century than it is now. Writers like Sumner and Ward would first construct lists of basic human drives – such as those for sexual fulfillment, affection, health, physical exercise and creativity, intellectual creativity and meaning, wealth, prestige, “power for its own sake,” and many more. Then they would attempt to establish their relative importance as drives, and from that they would deduce the ranks in social importance of family, economy, government, and so forth. And though this particular practice may be obsolete, a general motivational model of society underpins a number of modern theories, including versions

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Societies as organized power networks

5

of materialist and idealist theories. For example, many Marxists claim to derive the importance of modes of economic production in society from the supposed strength of the human drive for material subsistence.

Motivational theories will be discussed more fully in Volume III. My conclusion will be that though motivational issues are important and interesting, they are not strictly relevant to the issue of ultimate primacy. Let me briefly summarize that argument.

The pursuit of almost all our motivational drives, our needs and goals, involves human beings in external relations with nature and other human beings. Human goals require both intervention in nature – a material life in the widest sense – and social cooperation. It is difficult to imagine any of our pursuits or satisfactions occurring without these. Thus, the characteristics of nature and the characteristics of social relations become relevant to, and may indeed structure, motivations. They have *emergent* properties of their own.

This is obvious in nature. For example, the first civilizations usually emerged where there was alluvial agriculture. We can take for granted the motivational drive of humans to seek to increase their means of subsistence. That is a constant. What rather explains the origin of civilization is the opportunity presented to a few human groups by flooding, which provided ready-fertilized alluvial soil (see Chapters 3 and 4). No one has argued seriously that the dwellers in the Euphrates and Nile valleys had stronger economic drives than, say, the prehistoric inhabitants of the European landmass who did not pioneer civilization. Rather, the drives that all shared received greater environmental help from the river valleys (and their regional settings), which led them to a particular social response. Human motivation is irrelevant except that it provided the forward drive that enough humans possess to give them a dynamism wherever they dwell.

The emergence of *social* power relations has always been recognized in social theory. From Aristotle to Marx the claim has been made that “man” (unfortunately, rarely woman as well) is a social animal, able to achieve goals, including mastery over nature, only by cooperation. As there are many human goals, there are many forms of social relations and large and small networks of interacting persons, ranging from love to those involving the family, the economy, and the state. “Symbolic interactionist” theorists such as Shibutani (1955) have noted that we all dwell in a bewildering variety of “social worlds,” participating in many cultures – of occupation, class, neighborhood, gender, generation, hobbies, and many more. Sociological theory heroically simplifies, by selecting out relations that are more “powerful” than others, influencing the shape and the nature of other relations and, therefore, the shape and nature of social structures in general. This is not because the particular needs they satisfy are motivationally more “powerful” than others but because they are more effective as means to achieve goals. Not ends but means give us our point of entry into the question of primacy. In any society characterized

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 A history of power to A.D. 1760

by a division of labor, specialized social relations satisfying different clusterings of human needs will arise. These differ in their organizing capacities.

Thus we leave the area of goals and needs altogether. For a form of power may not be an original human goal at all. If it is a powerful *means* to other goals, it will be sought for itself. It is an *emergent* need. It emerges in the course of need satisfaction. The most obvious example may be military force. This is probably not an original human drive or need (I shall discuss this in Volume III), but it is an efficient organizational means of fulfilling other drives. Power is, to use Talcott Parsons's expression, a "generalized means" for attaining whatever goals one wants to achieve (1968: I, 263). Therefore, I ignore original motivations and goals and concentrate on emergent *organizational power sources*. If I talk sometimes of "human beings pursuing their goals," this should be taken not as a voluntaristic or psychological statement but as a given, a constant into which I will inquire no further because it has no further social force. I also bypass the large conceptual literature on "power itself," making virtually no reference to the "two (or three) faces of power," "power versus authority" (except in Chapter 2), "decisions versus nondecisions," and similar controversies (well discussed in the early chapters of Wrong 1979). These are important issues, but here I take a different tack. Like Giddens (1979: 91) I do not treat "power *itself* as a resource. Resources are the media through which power is exercised." I have two limited conceptual tasks: (1) to identify the major alternative "media," "generalized means," or, as I prefer, power sources and (2) to devise a methodology for studying organizational power.

Organizational power*Collective and distributive power*

In its most general sense, power is the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one's environment. *Social* power carries two more specific senses. The first restricts its meaning to mastery exercised over other people. An example is: Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance (Weber 1968: I, 53). But as Parsons noted, such definitions restrict power to its *distributive* aspect, power by A over B. For B to gain power, A must lose some – their relationship is a "zero-sum game" where a fixed amount of power can be distributed among participants. Parsons noted correctly a second *collective* aspect of power, whereby persons in cooperation can enhance their joint power over third parties or over nature (Parsons 1960: 199–225). In most social relations both aspects of power, distributive and collective, exploitative and functional, operate simultaneously and are intertwined.

Indeed, the relationship between the two is dialectical. In pursuit of their goals, humans enter into cooperative, collective power relations with one

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Societies as organized power networks

7

another. But in implementing collective goals, social organization and a division of labor are set up. Organization and division of function carry an inherent tendency to distributive power, deriving from supervision and coordination. For the division of labor is deceptive: Although it involves specialization of function at all levels, the top overlooks and directs the whole. Those who occupy supervisory and coordinating positions have an immense organizational superiority over the others. The interaction and communication networks actually center on their function, as can be seen easily enough in the organization chart possessed by every modern firm. The chart allows superiors to control the entire organization, and it prevents those at the bottom from sharing in this control. It enables those at the top to set in motion machinery for implementing collective goals. Though anyone can refuse to obey, opportunities are probably lacking for establishing alternative machinery for implementing their goals. As Mosca noted, “The power of any minority is irresistible as against each single individual in the majority, who stands alone before the totality of the organized minority” (1939: 53). The few at the top can keep the masses at the bottom compliant, provided their control is *institutionalized* in the laws and the norms of the social group in which both operate. Institutionalization is necessary to achieve routine collective goals; and thus distributive power, that is, social stratification, also becomes an institutionalized feature of social life.

There is, thus, a simple answer to the question of why the masses do not revolt – a perennial problem for social stratification – and it does not concern value consensus, or force, or exchange in the usual sense of those conventional sociological explanations. The masses comply because they lack collective organization to do otherwise, because they are embedded within collective and distributive power organizations controlled by others. They are *organizationally outflanked* – a point I develop in relation to various historical and contemporary societies in later chapters (5, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 16). This means that one conceptual distinction between power and authority (i.e., power considered legitimate by all affected by it) will not figure much in this book. It is rare to find power that is either largely legitimate or largely illegitimate because its exercise is normally so double-edged.

Extensive and intensive and authoritative and diffused power

Extensive power refers to the ability to organize large numbers of people over far-flung territories in order to engage in minimally stable cooperation. *Intensive power* refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization or commitment from the participants, whether the area and numbers covered are great or small. The primary structures of society combine extensive and intensive power, and so aid human beings in extensive and intensive cooperation to fulfill their goals – whatever the latter may be.

But to talk of power as organization may convey a misleading impression,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 A history of power to A.D. 1760

as if societies were merely collections of large, authoritative power organizations. Many users of power are much less “organized”; for example, market exchange embodies collective power, for through exchange people achieve their separate goals. And it embodies distributive power, whereby only some persons possess ownership rights over goods and services. Yet it may possess little authoritative organization to assist and enforce this power. To use Adam Smith’s famous metaphor, the principal instrument of power in a market is an “Invisible Hand,” constraining all, yet not controlled by any single human agency. It *is* a form of human power, but it is not authoritatively organized.

Hence, I distinguish two more types of power, authoritative and diffused. *Authoritative power* is actually willed by groups and institutions. It comprises definite commands and conscious obedience. *Diffused power*, however, spreads in a more spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded. It typically comprises, not command and obedience, but an understanding that these practices are natural or moral or result from self-evident common interest. Diffused power on the whole embodies a larger ratio of collective to distributive power, but this is not invariably so. It, too, can result in the “outflanking” of subordinate classes such that they consider resistance pointless. This is, for example, how the diffuse power of the contemporary world capitalist market outflanks authoritative, organized working-class movements in individual nation-states today – a point I elaborate in Volume II. Other examples of diffused power are the spread of solidarities such as those of class or nation – an important part of the development of social power.

Putting these two distinctions together gives four ideal-typical forms of organizational reach, specified with relatively extreme examples in Figure 1.1. Military power offers examples of authoritative organization. The power of the high command over its own troops is concentrated, coercive, and highly mobilized. It is intensive rather than extensive – the opposite of a militaristic empire, which can cover a large territory with its commands but has difficulty mobilizing positive commitments from its population or penetrating their everyday lives. A general strike is the example of relatively diffuse but intensive power. Workers sacrifice individual well-being in a cause, to a degree “spontaneously.” Finally, as already mentioned, market exchange may involve voluntary, instrumental, and strictly limited transactions over an enormous area – hence it is diffuse and extensive. The most effective organization would encompass all four forms of reach.

Intensivity has been much studied by sociologists and political scientists, and I have nothing new to add. Power is intensive if much of the subject’s life is controlled or if he or she can be pushed far without loss of compliance (ultimately to death). This is well understood, though not easily quantifiable

Societies as organized power networks			9
	<i>Authoritative</i>	<i>Diffused</i>	
<i>Intensive</i>	Army command structure	A general strike	
<i>Extensive</i>	Militaristic empire	Market exchange	

Figure 1.1. *Forms of organizational reach*

in the societies covered in this volume. Extensivity has not figured greatly in previous theories. This is a pity, for it is easier to measure. Most theorists prefer abstract notions of social structure, so they ignore geographical and sociospatial aspects of societies. If we keep in mind that “societies” are *networks*, with definite spatial contours, we can remedy this.

Owen Lattimore can start us on our way. After a lifetime studying the relations between China and the Mongol tribes, he distinguished three radii of extensive social integration, which he argued remained relatively invariant in world history until the fifteenth century in Europe. The most geographically extensive is *military action*. This is itself divisible into two, inner and outer. The inner reaches over territories that, after conquest, could be added to the state; the outer is extended beyond such frontiers in punitive or tribute raids. Hence the second radius, *civil administration* (i.e., the state) is less extensive, being at maximum the inner radius of military action and often far less extensive than this. In turn this radius is more extensive than *economic integration*, which extends at the maximum to the region and at the minimum to the cell of the local village market, because of the feeble development of interaction between units of production. Trade was not altogether lacking, and the influence of Chinese traders was felt outside the effective range of the empire’s armies. But communications technology meant that only goods with a high value-to-weight ratio – true luxury items and “self-propelled” animals and human slaves – were exchanged over long distances. The integrating effects of this were negligible. Thus, for a considerable stretch of human history, extensive integration was dependent on military and not economic factors (Lattimore 1962: 480–91, 542–51).

Lattimore tends to equate integration with extensive reach alone; and he also separates too clearly the various “factors” – military, economic, political – necessary for social life. Nevertheless, his argument leads us to analyze the “infrastructure” of power – how geographical and social spaces can be actually conquered and controlled by power organizations.

I measure the reach of authoritative power by borrowing from *logistics*, the military science of moving men and supplies while campaigning. How are commands actually and physically moved and implemented? What control by what power group of what type is erratically or routinely possible given existing logistical infrastructures? Several chapters quantify by asking questions like how many days it takes to pass messages, supplies, and personnel across

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63597-5 - The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760

Michael Mann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 A history of power to A.D. 1760

given land, sea, and river spaces, and how much control can be thus exercised. I borrow heavily from the most advanced area of such research, military logistics proper. Military logistics provides relatively clear guidelines to the outer reaches of power networks, leading to important conclusions regarding the essentially *federal* nature of extensive preindustrial societies. The unitary, highly centralized imperial society of writers like Wittfogel or Eisenstadt is mythical, as is Lattimore's own claim that military integration was historically decisive. When routine military control along a route march greater than about ninety kilometers is logistically impossible (as throughout much of history) control over a larger area cannot be centralized in practice, nor can it penetrate intensively the everyday lives of the population.

Diffused power tends to vary together with authoritative power and is affected by its logistics. But it also spreads relatively slowly, spontaneously, and "universally" throughout populations, without going through particular authoritative organizations. Such *universalism* also has a measurable technological development. It depends on enabling facilities like markets, literacy, coinage, or the development of class and national (instead of locality or lineage) culture. Markets, and class and national consciousness, emerged slowly throughout history, dependent on their own diffused infrastructures.

General historical sociology can thus focus on the development of collective and distributive power, measured by the development of infrastructure. Authoritative power requires a logistical infrastructure; diffused power requires a universal infrastructure. Both enable us to concentrate on an organizational analysis of power and society and to examine their sociospatial contours.

Current stratification theory

What, then, are the main power organizations? The two main approaches in current stratification theory are Marxian and neo-Weberian. I am happy to accept their initial joint premise: *Social stratification is the overall creation and distribution of power in society*. It is the central structure of societies because in its dual collective and distributive aspects it is the means whereby human beings achieve their goals in society. In fact agreement between them generally goes further, for they tend to see the same three types of power organization as predominant. Among Marxists (e.g., Wesolowski 1967; Anderson 1974a and b; Althusser and Balibar 1970; Poulantzas 1972; Hindess and Hirst 1975), among Weberians (e.g., Bendix and Lipset 1966; Barber 1968; Heller 1970; Runciman 1968, 1982, 1983a, b, and c), they are *class*, *status*, and *party*. The two sets of terms have roughly equivalent coverage, so in contemporary sociology the three have become the dominant descriptive orthodoxy.

I am largely happy with the first two, with economic/class and ideology/status. My first deviation from orthodoxy is to suggest *four*, not three, fundamental types of power. The "political/party" type actually contains two