



INTERVIEW WITH
MICHAEL MANN

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an interview with Michael Mann**
by Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo

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INTERVIEW

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In this brief but revealing interview with Professor Michael Mann we address and assess the fundamental novelties offered by volumes III and IV of his magnum opus *The Sources of Social Power*, focusing on two main issues. First, we emphasize conceptual and analytical questions. Second, we highlight two of the major themes of volumes III and IV: the *polymorphous* and *segmental* empires and globalizations, their historical formation and relationship. We conclude by asking Professor Mann about his take on Historical Sociology, a crucial yet downplayed tradition in Human and Social Sciences. Michael Mann's work is a clear demonstration of the imperative to recognize the centrality of this tradition. It is also an exemplary contribution to all the efforts that seek to place Historical Sociology at the fore of our individual and collective intellectual research.¹

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MIGUEL BANDEIRA JERÓNIMO *What do you consider to be the main innovations brought about by volumes III and IV of The Sources of Social Power to your model and its conceptual and analytic specificities?*

MICHAEL MANN *My volumes III and IV deploy the model of power set out in the first chapter of my first volume, published in 1986. I see control over four*

1 For a fascinating conversation between two great historical sociologists of our time, see Mann and Hall (2011). See also the reply given by Michael Mann to the constructive criticism offered *apropos* his work by several important sociologists, historians and political scientists (such as Jack A. Goldstone, Randall Collins, John M. Hobson, and Gianfranco Poggi) in Hall and Schroeder (2006, pp. 343-396).

power sources as crucial to the exercise of both distributive power (over others) and collective power (exercised jointly and in cooperation with others). A few amendments have been made to the model. I have clarified the difference between political and military power. Political power is the institutionalization of power relations over a given territory, backed up by mostly non-lethal, routinized and rule-governed coercion. Military power is the deployment of lethal violence which is aimed deliberately at terrifying, killing, and wounding people, and which is minimally or not at all institutionalized or rule-governed. Geopolitics lies between the two and can be either an extension of political or military power, according to whether inter-state relations contain matters of peace or war. The former are subject to negotiated rules and international courts and tribunals, the latter are not. Ideological power remains the control of broad meaning systems which aim to transform the world (and some of them do so). It is emphatically not the whole of “culture”, which I regard as too diffuse and fuzzy to permit much causal analysis. Economic power remains almost entirely unchanged. In these two volumes I apply this model to a period roughly between 1890 and the present-day, though for empires I start earlier and my end deals with 21st century futures. I have sought to explain the development of human society in this period in terms of the relations between the four sources of social power, especially as institutionalized in the organizations of capitalism, empires, and nation-states.

MBJ *In your introduction to Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945 (the third volume of The Sources of Social Power) you reassess the main principles and analytic guidelines set out in your first volume. Pondering the causes and dynamics of social change, and more particularly in relation with the model of punctuated equilibrium, you stress the idea that ideological, economic, military, and political powers “differ from each other orthogonally”. Is this a novelty, and to what extent?*

MM All four power sources interact, yet each has a degree of autonomy from the others, and they usually involve different geographical networks of interaction. In volume III I introduce the notion that their relations are “orthogonal” to each other: each source has a different internal logic of development and though these interact with and influence each other, these inter-relations are not determinant. There is no overall social system. The major ideologies of modern social life – religions, communism, fascism, liberalism, etc. – emerge in response to crises in the relations between the other three sources. Yet once emergent, they have autonomous power of their own. Similarly, political power relations are in a historical sense merely the institutionalization of the other power sources over a specific territory, yet once established they also have

their own emergent autonomy. By the time I reached into volumes III and IV I abandoned all hope that my final theory might be able to rank the sources of social power in terms of their overall causal power. There is no determination “in the last instance” – unless military or economic power relations destroyed the world. Causality varies by time and space, so that each power source can appear to be primary in different periods and places. But I have been able to end volume IV with an overall statement of the essential nature of each of the four power sources and what each is capable of.

MBJ *And from a methodological point of view, what new problems and insights emerged while conceiving volumes III and IV?*

MM Methodologically, volume III and especially volume IV cover periods which see an exponential explosion of evidence available to the historical sociologist. It has become much more difficult to handle this abundance of data. I have had to be much more selective of the themes and places which I investigate. However, more evidence brings advantages too. For example, we can be much clearer about the causes, processes, and consequences of World War I than was the case for earlier wars, and in turn we know more about World War II than its predecessor. Similarly we understand much more about the causes, processes, reactive policies, and consequences of the Great Depression of the 1930s than we do about the Depression of the 1870s.

Such detailed knowledge has led me to a theoretical shift. Knowledge of the minutia of decision-making has given me more appreciation of the capacity of humans to act in emotional and irrational ways. I had begun this shift in my book *The Dark Side of Democracy* (2005) in which I had sought to explain bouts of murderous ethnic cleansing. Volumes III and IV apply this at a more macro-level. Events rarely turn out as planned and they involve considerable raw emotions and persistent misperceptions, misunderstandings, and mistakes that change the course of history in both big and small ways. In the modern period I am able to study great crises in ways which had not been possible in previous periods. These might all have been faced up to in a different and better way. In these crises the decisions and emotions of individuals or small groups, especially those in leadership positions, can change the course of history. Volume III discusses the development of the crises involved in the two world wars, two great revolutions (in Russia and China), and the Great Depression. Volume IV discusses the crises of the Cold War, American imperial policy in the Third World, and the Great Recession of 2008, and its last chapters discuss the three great crises which are likely to worsen in the future – of global capitalism, nuclear war, and climate change. It explores possible alternative ways in which they might be handled in the future.

MBJ *In the III volume you finally bring empires back to the table: the “globalization of multiple empires” was one of the main historical institutional processes of “modern globalization”, alongside the “globalization of capitalism” and the “globalization of nation-states”. Can you summarize the advantages that this analytical operation brought to your previous assessments?*

MM Volume II had focused narrowly on the homelands of the Great Powers in Europe and America. My volume III corrects that by focusing on the European empires, especially the British Empire, plus the late-comer empires of the Americans and Japanese. Both volumes focus on China and Russia as well as the West and Japan. I make clear that during the whole of the period up to 1945 not nation-states but empires were the dominant political form for most of the world’s population. Empires enable us to see more clearly that globalization was never a singular process. Not only were the globalizations of the four power sources normally out of sync with each other, but the fact that there were eleven of them – produced globalizations that were “segmental”, to a degree segregated from each other. For example, though capitalism did push outwards transnationally, to wherever profit could be made in markets, capitalism was also partially constrained within the sphere of interest of each empire. The Gold Coast (now Ghana) traded mostly with Britain, not with the neighboring Ivory Coast, which in turn traded mostly with France, its mother country. Today the main language of Ghana is English while its neighbor speaks French. The effects of segmental globalizations (plural) are still evident today.

MBJ *And in volume IV, Globalizations, 1945–2011?*

MM In volume IV the emphasis shifts away from empires toward nation-states. Of course, the homelands of the empires had been developing steadily as national states through the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, but it was after World War II that all empires except one collapsed, and were replaced by 192 polities calling themselves nation-states. Once again, these multiple segments partially constrain the expansion of capitalism. For example, the rise of neoliberalism has usually been treated as a global phenomenon curtailing the power of all nation-states. Quite to the contrary, I show that its penetration has been highly uneven according to whether particular nation-states (some of them members of what I call “macro-regions”, like the Anglophone or Nordic countries) offer neoliberalism a hospitable environment. Moreover, if the goal of neoliberalism was to cut down the size of the state, then it failed, since the ratio of government spending to GDP across the world has remained more or less constant since the 1970s. In this post-war period a surge in the expansion of capitalism has been accompanied by a surge

in the globalization of the nation-state. They simply neither undermine nor reinforce one another, for they are still related orthogonally. This also means that the golden age of the nation-state was not in the past, as many have argued. Instead it has lasted from around 1950 to the present-day, and will last a good while longer yet.

MBJ *Your work is one of the most important examples of the intellectual benefits that can be derived from the interplay between sociology and history, some of their traditions, languages, and methods. Briefly, how do you appreciate the current relationship between both disciplines?*

MM My methods obviously combine a sociological with a historical approach. This is uncommon today though it was common in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Historical sociology is still a rather small slice of sociology, though it does include some of the most prominent sociologists. One particular neglect is that very few sociologists concern themselves with war and military relations. This is bizarre when one considers that the last hundred years have contained two world wars and eleven militaristic empires, one of which still seeks to dominate the world by military means. In contrast there have always been many military historians, though they are usually more concerned with narrative rather than theory, and they tend to focus more on the development of military technologies and tactics than on the social organization of war-making. Yet the subject area that has become known as “world history” has seen considerable recent expansion, driven by both real world globalization processes and by the relative decline of the West. I welcome the arrival of these historians. At the end of the day, however, I remain more of a sociologist than a historian. I love the narrative method (used by almost all historians but very few sociologists), because temporal analysis leads implicitly or explicitly to causal analysis and because it produces a more readable and often quite vivid text. Yet I always attempt to put narrative in the service of sociological theory. I hope the general reader will appreciate this.

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