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## For a plural historical sociology of imperialism and colonialism

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## COMMENTARY

MIGUEL BANDEIRA JERÓNIMO

# For a plural historical sociology of imperialism and colonialism

**I**n the *Preface* to the much anticipated third volume of his magnum opus *The Sources of Social Power: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945*, Michael Mann states that he felt the need to rectify the ‘neglect of the global empires created by the most advanced countries’ that the second volume revealed (Mann, 2012, p. vii). The importance of empires in the historical constitution of modern societies (and their forms of specialized knowledge<sup>1</sup>) is undeniable, and its contemporary resonances are obvious, even if still downplayed by many disciplines. Defining empire ‘as a centralized, hierarchical system of rule acquired and maintained by coercion through which a core territory dominates peripheral territories, serves as the intermediary for their main interactions, and channels resources from and between the peripheries’, and recognizing imperialism as a ‘core feature of modernity’, Mann finally stresses

1 The study of imperial formations is, or should be, inextricably linked to the study of the forms of specialized knowledge (especially the human and social sciences) that presided over their formation and historical evolution. This argument is developed in Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (2014). For some examples regarding specific disciplines, not including the traditional examples of geography and anthropology, see David Long and Brian C. Schmidt (eds.) (2005) and Georges Steinmetz (ed.) (2013).

their relevance to the understanding of modern and contemporary history, exploring their relation to and co-constitution with other major macro-historical actors and processes. As one of the major power organizations of human societies and as a specific type of ‘networks of interaction’, empires were crucial to multiple forms of globalization, defined as the *polymorphous*, competitive, and ‘plural extension of relations of ideological, economic, military, and political power across the world’.<sup>2</sup> 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’, generating its own contending ideologies (‘imperialism, anti-imperialism, and racism’).<sup>3</sup>

Like globalization, empires are also plural and require a multidimensional scrutiny, which can provide a combined, integrated use of *metrocentric*, *pericentric*, and international systemic scales of analysis and explanations. The exclusive focus on metropolitan processes, on local developments, or on international dynamics is insufficient. Only a combined approach enables a proper understanding of the multifaceted *nature* and manifestations of empire.<sup>4</sup> This plurality entailed different forms of ideological, economic, military, and political power (Mann’s IEMP model) and involved various repertoires of imperial rule, with disparate natures and degrees of coercion, accurately understandable only through examinations with a solid empirical commitment. Accordingly, Mann (2013, p. 213) offers a typology of empires – from *direct* and *indirect empires*, which involve colonies, to *informal* ones, and to mere *hegemony* – and identifies, especially regarding the *informal* type, distinct modalities of exerting authority and enacting coercion that characterize similar forms of power organization and relation. A ‘descending hierarchy of domination’ is therefore outlined. The ideal-type of *informal empire* entails several subtypes in which we can appreciate the plurality of forms of coercion that mark imperial connections and interactions: informal ‘gunboat’ empire, informal empire through proxies, and economic imperialism. The latter is a distinctive feature

2 *Ibid.*, p. 17. The fourth volume of Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power* is entitled *Globalizations*.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2, 17. For an excellent analysis of the connection between globalization and empires see, for instance, Christopher Bayly (2002, pp. 47-68) and Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson (2010).

4 See Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (2011, pp. 7-67). For an example of a collective effort to stress the polymorphous nature and *modus operandi* of the “third” Portuguese colonial empire, see Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (ed.) (2012). See also Michael Doyle, *Empires* (1986), which Mann cites as a reference for the need to integrate approaches, levels of analysis, and explanations.

of modern empires (given the efficiency of capitalism in integrating core and peripheral economies). While stressing the variety of forms and repertoires of imperial rule and coercion, Mann also emphasizes the fact that empires *typically* embrace several of those forms and repertoires, being a result of multiple combinations or 'impure mixtures' of social power as well.<sup>5</sup>

More than offering a rigid model to promote simplistic, ready-made formulae and assessments of imperial formations, Mann's purpose is, as it tended to be throughout his career, to offer a rich and balanced *historical* and *empirical* account of 'globalization imperially fractured'.<sup>6</sup> As the 'incurable empiricist' he constantly proclaims and demonstrates to be, his take on global historical empires abstains from proposing grand and overambitious typological, nomological, and evolutionary accounts. The practitioners of the *rise and fall models* and the advocates of general models and analysis of social change will have to look elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> As an 'analytical historian', as John Hall provocatively labels him, his approach to the plural manifestations of the imperial phenomena refuses to be captured by particularistic and ideographic narratives of great individuals, insulated societies, or *single* historical events.<sup>8</sup> As an important representative of a weberian historical sociology, Mann emphasizes the analytical principles of multi-causality (the existence and impact of plural, partially autonomous, interdependent power sources: e.g. Mann's IEMP model) and multi-spatiality (the connection and co-constitution of plural, interdependent spatial dimensions: e.g. Mann's statement that national and international societies are 'constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power'), and stresses, without failing to recognize the importance of Weber's *switchman metaphor*, the role of circumstantial, fortuitous transformations and of unintended influences promoted by the interplay between power forces in disparate scales and geographies. Mann's endorsement of Gellner's gatekeeper model of human progress (used especially to account for the nature of European historical trajectory), his notion of 'patterned mess' and his refusal of evolutionary, functional, and teleological historical assessments

5 Mann's (2008, pp. 9-13) early typological attempt in "American Empires: Past and Present", is replicated in *The Sources of Social Power: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945*, pp. 18-22. For the notion of repertoires of imperial rule see Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank (2010, pp. 3-8; 16-17).

6 The title of the first chapter of *The Sources of Social Power: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945*, pp. 17-57.

7 See, for instance, his remarks apropos the criticism of John Goldthorpe regarding historical sociology (Mann, 1991, 1994). For a rich analysis of Mann's methodological and analytical frameworks see Joseph Bryant (2006).

8 John A. Hall (2006, p. 52, footnote 3).

are particularly important in order to understand his overall historical-sociological approach, adding up to his rejection of an ultimate primacy of any of the four sources of social power and his defense of a combined, interconnected approach to their *specific* and *relative* nature and functioning.<sup>9</sup>

All these analytical and methodological principles must also be dominant in a comparative historical sociology of imperialism and colonialism. Although focused on the *cases* of the British, the United States, and the Japanese empires<sup>10</sup>, the third volume of *The Sources of Social Power* offers an important contribution to this paramount collective intellectual enterprise, advocating a *global* exploration of the influences, causes, motivations, and plural sources and dynamics of power relations that conditioned these imperial polities. A plural historical sociology of Portuguese imperialism and colonialism is yet to be done.<sup>11</sup>

9 See John M. Hobson (1998). For a criticism of the materialist and rationalist nature of the multicausality principle of neo-weberian wave in historical sociology, that precludes ideas and cultural dimensions from the analysis of interest formation, see Chris Reus-Smit (2002). For a critical analysis of Mann's contribution to the strengthening of the relationship between Historical Sociology and International Relations, see Stephen Hobden (1998). See also Mann's *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (1986, p. 1); *ibid*, *The Sources of Social Power: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914* (Mann, 1993, chapter 1); and Ernest Gellner (1980, pp. 73-80).

10 As Adam Tooze indicates, Tsarist Russia's near absence is noticeable. Adam Tooze (2013, esp. pp. 133-134).

11 For the US empire, alongside the already mentioned "American Empires: Past and Present", see also Michael Mann (2003; 2004).

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