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COMMENTARY

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Time is of the essence: Remarks on Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power*¹

I would like to begin this commentary on Michael Mann's (b. 1942) work by focusing upon his critical engagement with Theda Skocpol in the second volume of *The Sources of Social Power*, his magnum opus and one of the most ambitiously conceived sociological treatises of the last few decades. The object of this engagement is post-revolutionary France. In Mann's view, while it is indisputable that French revolutionaries modernized and bureaucratized state administration, this does not mean that the size or scope of total administration increased at all. Also, the performance of the revolutionary state was far from the image of efficiency it projected of itself. For instance, its fiscal record was pathetic; it was unable to collect more than 10% of the taxes it demanded. For most of the nineteenth century, France had not one administration but several ministries, in which personal discretion prevailed over the abstractness and universality one associates with modern bureaucracy. Mann writes: 'So the French Revolution, like the American,

¹ This text builds upon and expands the discussion of Michael Mann's work in Baert & Silva (2010, pp. 170-181).

promised more bureaucracy than it delivered. (...) Skocpol and Tilly emphasize bureaucratization and state power; I emphasize their limits” (Mann, 1993, p. 463).

Enlightening as this critical remark certainly is about Michael Mann’s relative positioning within the sub-field of historical-comparative sociology, it tells us little about his position within social theory more generally. For that, which is the aim of this paper, the relevant comparison is not with Skocpol, Tilly, or the later Giddens, who can all be said to illustrate the recent empirical turn in social theory, but with Talcott Parsons, the single most influential post-war American sociologist whose structural-functionalism reigned supreme practically until the early 1970s.

Mann’s lifelong aim has been to produce a theory with a degree of abstractness and generality equivalent to Parsons’s structural functionalism. Unlike Parsons, however, Mann rejects a conception of human societies as social systems founded on shared beliefs and expectations. Mann’s alternative consists in claiming that society is not a totality, neither is it a system. Instead, he offers us an analytical point of entry to deal with the ‘impure’ and ‘promiscuous’ (1993, p. 10) complexity of social life in the form of a model of the overlapping and intersecting networks of power that constitute society. Mann distinguishes four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political (IEMP). Unlike Parsons’s AGIL model, with its Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency functional imperatives, Mann’s IEMP model does not refer to an abstract social system divided into sub-systems or dimensions. Rather, it is a formalization of the major social networks present in concrete human societies from the beginning of historical records to the present. Let us now see in further detail how Mann conceptualizes the sources of social power and their institutional forms. This will be followed by a brief analysis of two books in which he applies this ‘developmental account of an abstraction, power’ (Mann 1986, p. 538), to concrete historical phenomena such as fascism and ethnic cleansing. I conclude with a brief discussion of some of the questions raised by Mann’s studies of the key category of events.

The starting assumption of Mann’s IEMP model is that social life can best be conceived of as a drama in which social actors struggle, sometimes to the death, to control ideological, economic, military, and political power organizations. The exercise of general power over a territory is made through a combination of four specific types of power. ‘Ideological power’ refers to the social power that the control of an ideology brings to those groups and individuals who monopolize it. Mann has two distinct examples in mind here; religions and secular ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism. The importance of these meaning-producing movements lies in their ability to control a

crucial human need, namely to find meaning in life, be it in a religious ritual or in a political rally. 'Economic power' is particularly important as it concerns the need to produce in order to subsist. No human society can survive for very long without extracting, transforming, distributing, and consuming natural resources. The struggle for the control of economic power is thus a crucial feature of social life. Going beyond Marx, Mann argues that the organizational forms of economic power include not only social classes, but also social sections and segments. For instance, any given social class is composed of several sections (say, a skilled trade), whereas a segment is here used as a group whose members are drawn from several classes (say, the social segment 'patron-client' includes members of at least two different social classes). Mann's analysis is thus more fine-grained than conventional social class analysis, dealing better with the multi-causal and multi-level character of most social phenomena. 'Military power' refers to how the modern nation-state has a monopoly of violence. This source of social power is relatively recent. Until the nineteenth century, armies were often controlled by noblemen as in the Middle Ages, or had substantial autonomy from the political power. So general power is exercised through a combination of all four types, which enjoy relative autonomy from each other. The last type, 'political power', refers to the power exerted by the state (on his theory of the state, see also Mann, 1988). The regulation of the nation-state's territory by a central administrative bureaucracy has proved to be an essential ingredient in modern human history.

Mann labels his theory of the state as 'institutional statism', a part of his more general 'organizational materialism' (Mann, 1993, p. 52). His theory of the state comes in two stages. First, Mann tries to provide an institutional definition of the state. In order to do so, he reinterprets Weber's conception of the state from a neo-institutionalist perspective. He is thus able to identify several organized actors in domestic and foreign policy, the two main areas of state intervention. Second, by resorting to a functionalist analysis, he seeks to counter the tendency of institutionalist analysis to proliferate organizational complexity. He does this by developing a polymorphous theory of 'higher-level state crystallizations' (Mann, 1993, p. 54). What does this mean? The idea is that every state is polymorphous, i. e., it is composed of multiple institutions. Over time, these institutions tend to crystallize. Thus, realist scholars tend to claim that modern states have crystallized into security-pursuing states, whereas Marxists usually argue that they have crystallized as capitalist states. Mann's approach offers a synthesis of these perspectives. In his view, there are four basic 'higher-level crystallizations' – 'capitalist, militarist, representative, and national' (Mann, 1993, p. 81) – none of which has ever enjoyed hegemonic status.

Mann has recently applied this social theoretical framework to the analysis of concrete historical phenomena. In the 2004 *Fascists*, the book whose translation into Portuguese has brought us here together today, Mann offers an exemplary combination of historical in-depth research and general social-scientific analysis. He comes very close to actually bridging the gap between history and sociology. First, he engages in a comparison of the trajectories of fascist movements in Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. Second, he provides insightful single country inter-regional comparisons. Third, he combines these with analyses of the successive phases of the developmental process of each fascist movement (Mann, 2004, pp. 1-30). Mann is thus able to make an important contribution to the literature on authoritarian regimes. He shows that in all six cases there is a prevalent core fascist constituency, i. e., a social basis of support that made it possible for fascist regimes to emerge and consolidate. Rather than being supported by the lower middle class, as usually assumed, Mann demonstrates that a heterogeneous social set comprising soldiers, veterans, civil servants, teachers, and members of an ethnic majority living in a disputed territory provided fascism with its social basis of support. Furthermore, Mann shows that in Nazi Germany a segment of civil society (namely, small-town, Protestant, middle-class associations) provided key support to Hitler's regime (Mann, 2004, pp. 177-206). This finding seems to confirm Jeffrey Alexander's thesis in *Real Civil Societies* on the ambivalent character of civil society, while crucially questioning the pervasive assumption in so many neo-Tocquevillian empirical political science studies of 'trust' and 'social capital', according to which civic participation is necessarily connected with liberal democracy. What Mann's *Fascists* shows us is that it is not. Civic participation does not necessarily promote liberal democracy; it can, and often does, promote authoritarianism.

Another application of his social theory is *The Dark Side of Democracy*, a monumental study of ethnic cleansing first published in 2005. Oddly enough, however, Mann's analysis of ethnic cleansing is not limited to democratic regimes, either in formation or established. Most of the book is not about democracies at all. Mann discusses at length the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the communist cleansing, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. Contrary to what is suggested by the title, ethnic cleansing emerges not as the dark side of democracy but of nationalism. This incongruity, however, should not discourage readers. *The Dark Side of Democracy* is, beyond doubt, the single best work by a historical sociologist on ethnic cleansing available today. Mann begins by identifying a set of necessary conditions for ethnic cleansing to occur (Mann, 2005, pp. 1-33). These include: 1) a divided elite from which a segment becomes radicalized; 2) a core constituency composed chiefly of

young males, which is mobilized in support of the radical segment of the elite; 3) several ethnic groups, with competing claims on territory and the state; 4) a crisis situation that dramatically enhances a sense of insecurity among the elite. Generalizing from several case studies, Mann suggests that ethnic cleansing typically occurs when three factors come together: there is a radicalized segment of the elite, it is in control of the state, and it mobilizes its social support to carry out the killings in response to the intensification of the crisis situation. Mann is thus rejecting two established explanations of ethnic cleansing, that it requires massive social support and that it is a state-planned endeavor. On the contrary, he claims, murderous ethnic cleansing, a distinctively modern phenomenon, has been the work of a relative few and it is far from being a carefully implemented state policy planned long in advance.

What these works demonstrate is Mann's singular ability to move back and forth between the explanation of particular historical events, and the explanation of macro-historical units of analysis such as societies or civilizations. To a great extent, this ability stems from what William Sewell has aptly described as Mann's: 'eventful conception of temporality' (2005, p. 121). There are three reasons for this. First, Mann's analyses clearly emphasize the interconnectedness of social temporalities and social space. In other words, his sensitivity to historical events goes hand-in-hand with a conception of social space as constituted by multiple, overlapping networks, rather than social systems. Second, by adopting a long-term perspective, he is able to reconfigure the very notion of event. Events are no longer confined to episodic, short-term changes – processes that mark decisive breaks with history and bring about deep and irreversible structural transformations. Even if these processes lasted for centuries, they are nevertheless to be understood as events. Third, his eventful sociology forces us to reconsider the directionality of historical change. In particular, I find it especially important the way Mann is able to undercut the dichotomy between evolutionary teleology and the all-too common denial that historical directionality is an issue at all. He does so by emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual agents and structural patterns of change. In their 'attempt to control the world and increase their rewards within it by setting up power organizations of varying but patterned types and strengths', Mann tells us in his characteristic style, 'real men and women *impose* patterns'. These 'power struggles are the principal patternings of history, but their outcomes have often been close-up' (1986, p. 532). Mann undercuts the dichotomy between evolutionary teleology and the denial of historical directionality by reconciling *historical development* (indeed, one of Mann's central questions relates to how power resources *develop*), with an appreciation of the role of *historical contingency*.

Despite the criticisms that have been levelled at Michael Mann's work in and beyond sociology departments over the years, I confess that I am very much taken by this kind of approach. Why? Because we seldom find anyone so seriously engaged in reconnecting social scientific explanation, the sacrosanct aim of 'numbers-and-maths' social scientists, and macro-history, commonly thought to be the natural turf of humanist-inclined historians. Time and again, Mann has shown that this separation is not a necessity, but a choice. For this reason alone, if no other, Michael Mann's historically-minded macro-sociology has much to commend it.

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