Michael Mann. *The Sources of Social Power*

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MANN'S POSTMODERNISM


Michael Mann has intentionally or unintentionally attempted to create a postmodern method of interpreting world history. While Mann never mentions the terms “postmodern,” “poststructural,” or “deconstruction,” there are striking parallels between Mann’s conceptions of history, society, and power and the basic tenets of postmodernist theory. Mann’s view of history resembles what Michel Foucault (1972:3-17) describes as the poststructuralist “epistemological mutation of history,” in which the “project of a total history,” which seeks to explain the forms of world civilizations and the processes that account for their rise and fall, is rejected in favor of a “general history” of discontinuous series of events and the relationship between them. Mann’s rejection of the concept of society reflects what Jean-François Lyotard (1984:14-18) describes as the consequence of the “breaking up of the grand Narratives” of the legitimation of knowledge—i.e. the “dissolution of the social bond,” or, the “atomization” of the social into flexible networks of language games.” And Mann’s definition of power once again echoes Foucault (1980:98), when the latter states that “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.” Power, for Foucault, is the “moving substrate of force relations” which are manifest in all human interactions. Power is the postmodern watchword; it is thought to be the only reality that persists through the “play of signifiers” that give precarious form to the world we know (Baudrillard, 1975:127). Mann shares the postmodern obsession with power and, after deconstructing the concepts “history” and “society,” he demonstrates that power is the only thing real or tangible enough to be a worthy object of scholarly inquiry.

The Deconstruction of History. Mann’s project is to trace the historical development of power. He writes of his book that “each chapter concerns itself with the ‘leading edge’ of power, where the capacity to integrate peoples and spaces into dominant configurations is most infrastructurally developed” (1986:31). A civilizationist might expect such a study to trace how the leading edge of power has shifted from one civilization to another throughout history; but Mann’s concern is with the development of power and world hegemony within the presently most powerful world civilization—the West. Mann declares that “the most appropriate history is that of the most powerful human society, modern Western civilization (including the Soviet Union), whose history has been just about continuous from the origins of Near Eastern civilization around 3000 B.C. to the present day” (1986:31). Thus “history” is deconstructed into “power.”
Mann does not explain why, in his judgement, "the most appropriate history is that of the most powerful human society." This is simply stated as a given. But why is it inappropriate, or less appropriate, to write the histories of less powerful societies? Why they failed to attain global hegemony is surely just as interesting a question as why the West succeeded in doing so. Beyond this point, however, there is the claim advanced by some comparative civilizations scholars that the history of each culture on the face of the earth should be studied as a means of mapping the "irreversible directionalities of development" (Nelson and Kavolis, 1973:13).

Furthermore, the notion that one can study only the history of "the most powerful human society" in isolation from developments in other, less powerful, parts of the world ignores the claim of Immanuel Wallerstein (1976:229-239) that the only "real" unit of analysis for historical sociology is the world-system. While Wallerstein's study of the hegemony of the world-system is flawed because he focuses almost exclusively on the growth of economic power, which Mann avoids by postulating the interplay of four sources of social power throughout history, Wallerstein does rightly point out that states can be only relatively strong or weak—i.e. in relation to each other. It seems reasonable to believe that we cannot know in what sense Western civilization is strong unless we also know in what sense other civilizations are weak.

Every world historian knows that the West was not always at the pinnacle of world power. In fact, the period covered in the first volume of Mann's work, i.e. from the "beginning" to A.D. 1760, is generally recognized as a time during which the West did not even emerge as a competitor for world power until the sixteenth century. The clear dominance by the West over the rest of the world was not established until after 1760, at the beginning of the industrial revolution. This pattern of history is described by William McNeill (1963), although McNeill does not treat the rise of Near Eastern civilization as part of the development of the West—the West, in his narration, starts out as a peripheral civilization in Greece (from 1700-500 B.C.), gradually emerging to compete for power with other cultures (McNeill, 1963:167-249).

Assuming history to be deconstructed to power, then, the question I raise is whether it is appropriate for a history of power to focus only on the history of the currently dominant world civilization, or whether it would be more appropriate, and honest, to explore, as does McNeill, how the center of global power has shifted throughout history from one region to another, thereby giving, for example, Islamic, Indian, and Chinese civilizations a role in world history.

And is the West truly so dominant as Mann thinks? Simply put, it is impossible for me to believe that any one culture can be supreme in each of Mann's four types of social ideological, economic, military, and political power for any sustained length of time. Certainly, Western civilization has not been the world's most powerful ideological, economic, military, and political force throughout all of world history; and it is difficult to believe that the West dominates the world in each of these aspects today. Indeed, by what absolute criteria can anyone compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of ideological, economic, military, and political power between different
cultures? How can one say whether Marxism is ideologically stronger than liberal democracy, or that either of these is "stronger" than Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism? In what sense is the West today economically "stronger" than Japan? If any country that possesses nuclear weapons has the potential to destroy the world, is the West militarily "stronger" than China? Finally, should one judge the "strength" of a political system on the basis of its stability, or of its dynamism? Japan has had about the world's longest unbroken succession of emperors; India has perhaps survived the largest number of external invasions. Which has the stronger political system, Japan, India, or the West?

Consequently, in his shunning of other civilizations besides the West, Mann risks being accused of ethnocentrism, even though Mann does not particularly like the "fact" that the West reigns supreme, and believes that he is simply describing an objective state of affairs. It is, however, true that, unlike Hegel, Mann denies that it was in any sense inevitable that the West rise to world hegemony. Regarding the supremacy of Western culture, Mann says that "there has been nothing 'necessary' about it—it just happened that way..." (Mann, 1986:31). This is the manifestation of Mann's postmodern conception of world history, which he claims to have derived from Ernest Gellner's notion of "neo-episodic" social development. This, according to Mann, entails the view that "fundamental social change occurs, and human capacities are enhanced, through a number of 'episodes' of major structural transformation" (Mann, 1986:3). It is important to note that, for Mann, these episodes are not part of any kind of developmental historical process. Mann claims to believe that history develops but that there is no discernible pattern to this development. "History," to Mann, "seems just one damned thing after another" (1986:532).

The Deconstruction of Society. "Societies," says Mann, "are not unitary. They are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities" (1986:1-2). Mann points out that the etymology of the word "society" can be traced to the Latin term "societas" which signified a non-Roman ally willing to follow Rome into battle. This definition, according to Mann, denoted an asymmetrical alliance, a "society" comprised of "a loose confederation of stratified allies" (1986:14). Mann claims that "the most frequent usage of the term 'society' is loose and flexible, indicating any stable human group" (1986:13). He purposely rejects the more conventional usage of the term "society," i.e. as a unitary social system, by sociologists from Comte, to Durkheim, to Parsons; and he maintains that "of the major theorists, only Weber showed a wariness of this approach and only Parsons has confronted it explicitly" (1986-13). Mann's definition of society, then, is presented as a slight modification of Parsons' definition of society as "a type of social system, in any universe of social systems which attains the highest level of self-sufficiency as a system in relation to its environment" (Parsons, 1966:9). "By dropping the excessive use of the word 'systems' while preserving Parsons' essential meaning," Mann believes, "we can arrive at a better definition: A society is a network of social interaction at the boundaries of which is a certain level of interaction cleavage between it and its environment" (1986:13).
I raise only two of many possible objections to this procedure. First, I do not see how it is possible to drop Parsons' use of the term "system" without also dropping Parsons, since his life project was to show how society can fruitfully be thought of as a system. Second, it is quite wrong to state that only Parsons has explicitly confronted the problem of the concept of a unitary social system. To the best of my knowledge, it was Georg Simmel who did the most work towards demonstrating that society is not a unitary system but a network of social interaction (1950:3-25). Mann's complete neglect of Simmel throughout his work is problematic, especially since Simmel's ideas about the nature of society as networks of social interaction, the functionality of conflict, and the social significance of marginal people are directly relevant to many of Mann's major themes.

Perhaps the primary unresolved paradox in Mann's book concerns his insistence, on the one hand, that society is nothing but a loose network of social interaction, and, on the other hand, that the rise and persistence of civilizations have entailed an oppressive amount of what he calls "social caging," since caging seems to serve as a vehicle for reintroducing system and process to the deconstructed analysis. Starting with Renfrew's definition of civilization as "insulation from nature," Mann relates that there were two main stimuli for the emergence of civilizations. The initial thrust towards civilization was the development of alluvial and irrigation forms of agriculture, developed in response to environmental constraints, which, as Mann puts it, closed the "escape route" for those who became agriculturalists (the earliest being those who, around 4000 B.C., settled in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and along the alluvial shores of the Nile river). They, according to Mann, "unlike those in the rest of the globe, were constrained to accept civilization, social stratification, and the state. They were trapped into particular social and territorial relationships, forcing them to intensify those relationships rather than evade them" (1986:74-75). This process is referred to by Mann as "environmental circumscription" (1986:75). Here, I think, Mann is influenced by McNeill's romantic depiction of ancient, free-spirited, nomad, pastoralists who repudiated crop tillage as "unworthy of free men" (1963:16).

The second factor contributing to the emergence of the first civilizations that Mann discusses has to do with the fact that they were situated in geographical regions of great ecological contrasts, say, between the alluvial "core" and the hinterland "periphery" (1986:76). "Such contrasts," writes Mann, "seem the recipe for the emergence of civilizations" (1986:81). In Mann's view, the interaction between alluvium and hinterlands was crucial for the development of further "social caging" within the core—that is, the existence, for the core, of an "other" served to solidify its boundaries (1986:77). At the same time, the impetus from the core led outward to the less settled regions, bringing them within the fold of civilization (1986:92-93). These peripheral areas turn out, for Mann, to be the key to the progression of world history because they introduce innovations in the core's sources of social power that eventually allow the periphery to dominate the core and then become a core itself in a dialectical process Mann terms "interstitial emergence" (1986:161-167) or "interstitial surprise" (1986:533-541). The
peoples who have lived on the margins of civilization, referred to by Mann as the “Marcher lords,” then, have been the bearers of the “world soul” of history (1986:130-178). In the words of Mann, “the world-historical process acquires their migratory legs” (1986:539). This, despite Mann’s earlier insistence that no discernible process is evident throughout the course of world history.

Power. Mann’s deconstruction of the concept of society is necessary in order for him to argue that power is what is ultimately “primary” or “determining” in human interactions (1986:2). This is the major point Mann seeks to make in his book, that “societies are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (1986:1). Mann proceeds to delineate the four sources of social power which combine to form his IEMP model of organized power (1986:2-3). But, despite the fact that the assertion of four sources of social power seems to imply a functional relationship between them, Mann attempts to avoid what Bryan Turner (1986) has called the “inescapability” of functionalism by denying outright that there is any kind of normative basis for social order. Society, for Mann is nothing but the interplay of ideological, economic, military, and political power.

By denying the normative basis of social order, Mann implicitly rejects the crux of Durkheim’s and Parsons’ work, and falls back on a crude utilitarian theory of maximizing man. “Human beings,” he remarks, “are restless, purposive, and rational, striving to increase their enjoyment of the good things of life and capable of choosing and pursuing appropriate means to do so” (1986:4). This premise leads him, ironically, to borrow Parsons’ phrasing of power as “a ‘generalized means” for attaining whatever goals one wants” (1968:263). I say this is ironic because the main purpose of Parsons’ book, The Structure of Social Action, was to address the “Hobbesian problem of order,” i.e. how social order could be maintained when each individual pursues his own ends (1968:89-94). While Parsons wrote that “the ultimate ends of different chains [of means-end relationships] cannot be related to each other at random but must to a significant extent constitute a coherent system” (1968:231), Mann ignores the issue of the conflict of ultimate ends altogether. The Hobbesian problem of order does not exist for him because he does not believe that society is comprised by normative boundaries.

Mann, when he talks about society, mentions only environmental circumscription, which has been discussed, and “compulsory cooperation,” which is a term borrowed from Herbert Spencer referring to military dictatorship. Compulsory cooperation is what Mann claims held together the first “empires of domination,” i.e. the Akkadian, the Assyrian, and the Roman (1986:146-155), although he does observe that during times of “ideological transcendence” a kind of “normative pacification” of social unrest was occasionally possible in history [1986:301-340]. Mann makes a special effort to demonstrate the beneficence, or at least the functionality, of compulsory cooperation (1986:148-152), and I might speculate that he does so in order to make less frightening the only alternative he really offers to the Hobbesian “war of all against all” —i.e. the Leviathan.

Mann offers us a history of the sources of social power that denies its own
possibility. How can power develop if there is no history? In what does social power subsist if there is no society? How can there be any sources of power when there is nothing which potentially cannot serve as a source of power, i.e. as a means to some end? But if The Sources of Social Power is not a history, nor a sociology, nor a theory of power, then what is it? It is precisely this problem of identity that is raised by the condition of postmodernity, and which should serve as the starting point for any serious postmodernist text. Otherwise, writing becomes a mere game of charades in which words can mean anything and nothing.

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References


*MORGAN REDIVIVUS*


This book is published in a Classics of Anthropology series. Morgan (1818-1881), a lawyer by profession, acquired a student interest in the Indian culture of the Iroquois. That growing social-political interest in ethnology paralleled a relatively brief but highly successful career in law. He was able to retire with a modest fortune and devote his life (from 1856) to