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A conversation with Michael Mann

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The Man Behind the Mann: Introduction to the Forum on Michael Mann

George Lawson

Abstract

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a concerted effort by International Relations (IR) scholars to engage with classical social theory, a tradition that takes in figures such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, C. Wright Mills and Raymond Aron, and more recently, Anthony Giddens and Charles Tilly. Of these comparative macro-sociologists, perhaps the most interesting from an IR perspective is Michael Mann whose oeuvre, now spanning four decades, includes a two-volume history of power in world affairs alongside substantial interventions on debates relating to ethnic cleansing, empire, state-formation and fascism. The interview and forum printed below are, in the first instance, attempts to tease out Mann's most important contributions to social science in general and to IR more specifically. But contributors are also keen to impress upon Mann, and historical sociologists more generally, the need to factor in contemporary advances in both IR theory and practice. As a result, the interview, comment pieces and Mann's reply bear close reading not only for IR specialists, but also for those involved in the wider enterprise of classical social theory itself.

Why Mann?

Michael Mann is an unusual sociologist in many regards, but two reasons stand out above all. First, Mann's work, now spanning four decades, is rooted in the classical sociological tradition, a tradition which emphasises the importance of carrying out empirically grounded, comparative and historical research into the macro-processes that drive world-historical development. This approach is much out of fashion, particularly in the United States where Mann is primarily based and where sociology has become caught between the deductive quantification of universal abstractions on the one hand and the cultural turn on the other. The result is that Mann is frequently knocked down by traffic from both sides of the methodological freeway. Nevertheless, such an approach, following in the footsteps of both Weber and Marx, Tocqueville, C. Wright-Mills, Raymond Aron and others, allows Mann to approach big issues—the history of power in world affairs, ethnic cleansing, empire, state formation and the like—with a balance between theory and practice, and a cross-disciplinary appeal that few contemporary sociologists can match.¹ Secondly, Mann, unlike many of his peers, has consistently shown an interest in International Relations (IR). As the interview printed below shows, this interest stems more from IR's empirical assets than by any virtue it may possess in terms of its theoretical insights. Indeed, Mann is rather scathing, as well he might be, of the seemingly tireless ability of those in IR to reinvent the *Methodenstreit* apparently *ad infinitum*. Despite this, Mann has an affection for International Relations which is rare among sociologists; one which points towards a potentially fruitful alliance between two disciplines that have not, as yet, been allied to any great effect.

There are further reasons why Mann should interest an IR audience. Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a concerted effort by a number of scholars working within International Relations to learn from the work of Mann and other comparative macro-sociologists—Charles Tilly, Anthony Giddens, Theda Skocpol, John Hall, Immanuel

¹ As Mann writes in his response piece to this forum, 'I am a proudly heterodox sociologist'.

Wallerstein and others have become much cited, if not always quite so carefully read. As a result, a historical-sociological turn in IR, most evident in the UK through the work of Fred Halliday, Barry Buzan, John Hobson, Justin Rosenberg and others, but also in the United States via Stanley Hoffman, Donald Puchala, Hendrik Spruyt and other conduits, has enabled some path-breaking work to take place on the variation between international systems over time and place, the role of radical change in the making of the modern world, and on the global origins of modernity itself. Interestingly, despite this burgeoning interest in historical sociology and despite the olive branch that Mann has held towards IR, it is not clear that IR's curiosity comes with a concomitant interest from most mainstream historical sociologists. Indeed, some IR scholars—Hobson, Rosenberg and Halliday among them—have begun to seriously question just how historical sociologists conceptualise and operationalise the international realm, and what this means for their overall enterprise. At least to some extent, the apprentices are turning on the sorcerers.

The interview and forum printed below are therefore undertaken with two main intentions—to tease out Mann's most important contributions to social science in general and to IR more specifically, and also to deliver some challenges to Mann and his fellow historical sociologists from those in IR who are most open to his work but who are also concerned about certain aspects of it. As such, the interview, comment pieces and Mann's reply bear close reading not only for IR specialists, but also for those involved in the theory and practice of historical sociology more generally. Like Mann's research itself, the range of the contributions printed below aptly indicate the promise of historical sociology in IR. It also begins the task of opening up a presently under-explored field of enquiry—what IR specialists can contribute to the wider enterprise of historical sociology.

The Man Behind the Mann

Michael Mann was born near Manchester to a lower-middle-class family. He went to grammar school and then to Oxford, where he studied history. As he discusses in the interview, history was Mann's first love and his academic career has been a process of gradually broadening out from the study of detail and empirical facts.² Mann, almost by chance, received his PhD as a by-product of his involvement in a project awarded to his department which studied the effects on workers and their families of a factory relocation from a city to a rural area. Mann then began his projects on world history and historical sociology, working in various sociology departments in the UK, including Essex and the London School of Economics (LSE), before taking up residence at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1987, a post he has held ever since.

The importance of at least two strands of Mann's early career are worth highlighting: first, the process of working *from* history rather than imposing theory *on* it; and second, the consistency to which he has applied normative concerns—equality, gender, social justice and, more recently, empire—to his academic work, a point questioned by Fred Halliday and which Mann responds to in his article. Both of these long-standing strands in Mann's work leave him open to attack on the grounds that he is insufficiently theoretical or value free. Mann is fairly indifferent to these critiques—he calls himself a 'methodological philistine' and offers the disclaimer that 'operational purposes should always be subordinated to substantive ones'. But the hegemonic shift from sociology to economics as the 'queen of the social sciences' has enabled some scholars, many of them in IR, to fail to see the promise of Mann's work

² Hence his comment, 'I am rather empiricist'.

both for the subject and for the academy more generally, usually on the most spurious of methodological grounds.

Mann's Method

Mann's approach is aimed at the middle ground between theory and history. As he puts it, 'too much scholarly attention to the facts makes one blind, too much listening to the rhythms of world history makes one deaf'.³ The result is a zigzagging process in which empirical research and theoretical hypothesis act as two parts of a continuing dialogue, refining each other at every turn. Such an approach allows Mann to differentiate between various forms of social facts as they emerge and move according to time and place—empires, states, ideological movements and the like change in form rather than sustain an eternal logic, although, as Mann is keen to point out in both the interview and his response piece, there are certain regularities to both domestic and international processes. Mann recognises that his work relies on an 'as if' positivism which retains a pragmatic basis in the necessity of testing one's hypothesis empirically, while also acknowledging its epistemological frailties. He is fully aware of the tyranny of accepting social facts as objective 'things'—that to do so means accepting, reflecting and reproducing the predominant socialisation of the time, but this does not lead him to give up on the process of conducting meaningful social science that is both empirically grounded and ethically aware.

Mann's particular means of filtering through what he calls 'the mess of history' is the IEMP model, so-called for its four central dimensions: ideological, economic, military and political power relations. These four fundamental sources of social power, ideal types with their roots in the Weberian triad of class, status and party, are the 'proximate method' by which Mann seeks to provide a pattern to world historical development. Mann argues that there is no fundamental split between the domestic and the international realms—in fact, given the chance 'I would do away with the concept of society altogether'.⁴ Rather, Mann's focus is on the interstitial openings around which needs and networks are formed and institutionalised. The resultant crystallisations are organised into four central forms which Mann traces via what he calls 'neo-episodic spurts'. At these world-historical conjunctures, the predominant form of power, usually in combination with one or more of the others, generates a particular form of social organisation. Thus, different periods of world history have different constellations of power which are made recognisable by their specific organisational matrix.

There are two aspects of the IEMP model that brook controversy. The first is the separation of military power from political power—an issue not addressed by contributors here, but one that is dealt with in some depth elsewhere.⁵ But a second issue concerning the IEMP model has more direct implications for IR and for the study of historical sociology in IR. During the 1970s and 1980s, what Dennis Smith labelled as a 'second wave' of historical sociologists introduced an exogenous dimension to what had previously been largely endogenous accounts of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the advent of modernity, and the birth of the industrial, bureaucratic, rational state.⁶ Tilly, Skocpol, Giddens, Hall, Mann and others began to see geopolitical conflict, and in particular war, as fundamental to

³ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to 1760 AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), viii.

⁴ *Social Sources of Social Power, Volume 1, 2*.

⁵ See, for example, the various contributions to *An Anatomy of Power*, John Hall and Ralph Schroeder (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ Dennis Smith, *The Rise of Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

processes of state formation. As a result, many of them accepted a rather narrow view of IR as the study of war and peace in which states were the primary, and in some cases the ultimate, actors in world politics and the decisive arbiters of international authority. This phase, in which many historical sociologists accepted a kind of à la carte realism, lay behind much of Mann's work in the first volume of *Sources* and his volume of essays, *States, War and Capitalism*, first published in 1988.⁷ And it is this 'off-the-shelf' IR realism that both Fred Halliday and John Hobson claim is problematic for Mann's general account of world-historical development.⁸

Mann responds robustly to these claims, particularly in his response piece. Mann's first point is that each source of social power operates within its own social and organisational logic. As such, there can be no question of ultimate primacy. Rather, each source of social power has its period of ascendancy, usually in conjunction with one or more of the others. Such a view of the multiple trajectories within world-historical development leaves Mann open to the charge that he is failing to provide a determinate theory of social change. But this is not an issue with which Mann has much truck. After all, his work, perhaps best seen as a form of analytic history, is less concerned with theoretical elegance than with making sense of the complex meanderings of world history. As John Hall bluntly puts it, 'Mann seeks the truth'.⁹ Working *from* empirical events, facts and processes rather than *within* the confines of a necessarily limiting general abstraction provides Mann with the scope to make interventions in a range of issues beyond those confined by a parsimonious, and frequently banal, conjecture. As Mann points out in the interview, he is not concerned with the theoretical baggage within which various disciplines labour—Mann's reading is resolutely instrumental. IEMP is the map that Mann uses to navigate through history, allowing him to circumvent turf wars and others' theoretical prejudices. This is both the promise of and pay-off from what Hall calls Mann's 'fastidious empiricism'.¹⁰

On the second charge of whether Mann's conception of the international weakens his overall account of world-historical development, disagreements are yet more marked. Mann's view of the international system—as primarily organised as either empires of domination (a form of hierarchy in IR terms), or as multi-actor power civilisation (a kind of international society underpinned by diplomacy, norms, shared rules and the like)—can, it is argued, reproduce a continuist mystique in which the central actors, dramas and processes of world politics are replicated within a timeless systemic logic. Fred Halliday, in particular, is concerned that Mann has been seduced by the realist focus on the eternal features of the international landscape—Mann's story of the international realm, for Halliday, fails to match the depth of his insights into the domestic sources of social change. Needless to say, Mann rejects these charges, arguing that they are based on an outdated and erroneous view of his work that does little justice to the rigour and richness of his analysis. Beyond some obvious facile remarks about the importance of states and geopolitics, Mann asks Halliday and Hobson (who also raises questions about Mann's attachment to a realist view of the international system), to find any evidence in his work, at least over the last ten years, of a pronounced engagement with realism or neorealism.

⁷ Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

⁸ It has also led some commentators, as raised in the interview, to question whether Mann's story of world history is lopsided, favouring military power and geopolitical conflict at the expense of the international dimensions of the three other forms of power.

⁹ *An Anatomy of Power*, Hall and Schroeder (eds.), 51.

¹⁰ It may be that Mann is becoming increasingly empirical over time. While the first volume of *Sources* dealt with world history from 'the beginning' until 1760 in 500-odd pages, Volume II covered only 150 years in 800-odd pages. This level of detail has led the Italian scholar Gianfranco Poggi to exclaim (in *An Anatomy of Power*, Hall and Schroeder (eds.), 136), 'if he read Mann, Occam would reach for his razor'.

It is possible to find sympathy with both sides of this argument. Certainly, a reductionist ontology of the international realm does seem to pervade Mann's work and, in his response piece, Mann concedes that he has, to date, under-theorised the international realm. But Mann is also at pains to point out that some of this debate can degenerate into little more than name calling, or indeed, into 'paradigm wars gone mad'. Here Mann clearly has a point. IR seems to revel in the mud slinging that accompanies academic labelling games. Much of this is rudimentary in the extreme—to note the power of states and statesmen makes one a realist just as to be interested in meaning, perceptions and ideology denotes one a constructivist. This is a sorry state of affairs and Mann is right to chastise IR's navel gazers. Nevertheless, the bigger question remains—to what extent Mann's limited view of what IR is, and should be concerned with, blinds him to the *multiple* ways in which international processes impact on world-historical development. It may be that this lack of attention to a broader understanding of international relations, both as subject matter and as discipline, is born of Mann's necessarily ruthless interdisciplinarity—a kind of intellectual asset stripping in which Mann carries out what he calls 'looting and pillaging raids' on other disciplines. Perhaps these raids entail too much attention to detail and too little to the debate that surrounds them. Either way, this is certainly an issue that, like a good play, is likely to run and run.

Empire, Democracy and Globalisation

A second charge made by John Hobson is that Mann buys into a Eurocentric, predominantly Weberian, account of the miraculous rise of the west. In his response to Hobson, Mann points out that understanding the 'superiority' in modern western forms of technological development, mode of production, institutional apparatus and forms of governance does not necessarily require one to make comparable ethical judgements. Moreover, Mann's views on the 'dark side' of western 'civilisation' seem to confirm in him less a view of western exceptionalism than its inverse—that the west is exceptionally bad! Hence, for Mann, militarism, imperial slaughter and, indeed, ethnic cleansing have their roots and have reached their apogee in the west. In addition, the parlous state of contemporary global affairs seems to have so infuriated Mann that he has returned, particularly in his recent book on the stillborn US empire, to the more overtly normative concerns of his early sociology. *Incoherent Empire* is a powerful polemic against both the rationale and the ethical legitimations which underpin attempts at generating an American *imperium*.¹¹

Although Mann has, at times, linked his academic work with a democratic-socialist agenda, or perhaps more recently a social-democratic agenda, he is more worried about the blending of politics and ethics when it comes to the arena of formal politics. Indeed, much of Mann's work on fascism, ethnic cleansing and empire has been concerned with critiquing the fusion of ethics with political authority.¹² Hence, Mann sees fascism not as an extreme aberration from normalcy but as a movement which provided a rational response to a systemic crisis within western liberal civilisation itself. For Mann, fascism's concept of virtue, and its notions of organic nationalism and the radical state, became allied to paramilitarism and a movement that brought together a coalition of disaffected groups. The result was a cocktail of fearsome potency. In this union of political and normative force,

¹¹ Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003).

¹² See Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Mann, *Incoherent Empire*.

Mann argues, fascism shares a family resemblance with both imperialism and ethnic cleansing. Mann rejects the claim that these movements are in any way a sideshow to modernity, democracy and liberalism. Rather, the confusion in modern western societies between the concepts of *demos* and *ethnos* lies behind both the unique ferocity of contemporary forms of ethnic cleansing *and* the sense of mission which drives America's neoconservatives.

In his analysis of social power, empire and democracy's 'dark side', Mann's overriding concern is with instability—the development of a systemic or organic crisis (in which international conflict and war play a large role), and the opening that this provides for extremist movements capable of mobilising support for radical programmes. In this sense, some democracies, particularly those that are uncertainly consolidated, offer a greater opportunity for extreme killing than stable regimes, democratic or authoritarian. Mann claims that each macro-context contains its dark side and that each social order contains the seeds of its own 'solutions' to periods of instability—a mixture of idealism and rationality that engenders both liberal democracy and fascism, imperialism and ethnic cleansing. For Mann, as he makes clear during the interview, progress is at best a relativist process.

Mann's current work, as he gears up towards the next stage of the *Sources* project, is organised around the concept of globalisation(s) which he sees as the (albeit uneven) macro-context of the contemporary world. Mann's already published work on globalisation suggests that, while globalisation has undeniable constraining effects on state capacities, this is far from being a zero-sum process.¹³ Hence, globalisation also contains international, transnational, regional and local processes—pluralities which affect, but do not always weaken, state capacities. In her contribution to this forum, Linda Weiss extends this point, claiming that Mann's work on globalisation can be pushed towards an understanding of globalisation as state enabling as well as state constraining. For Weiss, globalisation is a process which *entwines* national and global power networks, a point she demonstrates through case studies of the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Next Steps

Weiss's article is, in itself, a tribute to the manifold ways in which Mann has contributed to debates far removed from his origins in industrial and family sociology. Only touched upon in the interview and the forum are Mann's work on the state and state autonomy, while neither Mann's well-known distinction between 'despotic' and 'infrastructural' power nor his work on the 'caging' of social relations are mentioned at all.¹⁴ As Fred Halliday notes in his article for this forum, 'if the criterion of a sound theoretical system is that it suggests a fertile research agenda then this [Mann's] is it'. Mann has said that the great virtue of comparative work is that it does 'not take our own country as the limits of our vision'—this is a maxim he has followed consistently and a pursuit that he has pursued tirelessly.¹⁵ And as Mann remarks in a comment picked up by Halliday for the forum, 'I haven't finished yet'. In upcoming years, it may be that Mann's contribution to IR in particular will grow—as yet, it may be the most underdeveloped aspect in his work. In this enterprise it will be interesting to note just how much attention Mann pays to IR's own band of historical sociologists and how much he

¹³ Michael Mann, 'Has Globalisation Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation-State?', *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, no.3 (1997): 472–96.

¹⁴ Discussion of these issues, and more, can be found in Hall and Schroeder (eds.), *An Anatomy of Power*.

¹⁵ Cited in Harry Kreisler's interview with Michael Mann for the University of California Berkeley's television series, 'Conversations with History': *Incoherent Empire: A Conversation with Michael Mann* (University of California Berkeley Conversations with History Series, 27 February 2004).

looks beneath IR's datasets towards the deeper issues, tensions and debates that lie beneath the discipline's surface. His openness to this possibility, the range of his work to date, and the promise of more to come make Mann a scholar of enormous value, as this forum testifies.

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