

**George Lawson**

## A conversation with Michael Mann

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## The Social Sources of Life, the Universe and Everything: A Conversation with Michael Mann

George Lawson

### Abstract

Michael Mann is best known, in International Relations (IR) circles at least, for his two-volume work, *The Sources of Social Power*, an attempt to chart and assess the development of world-historical development from ‘the beginning’ to the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> But Mann’s career, which spans over four decades, also encompasses forays into state theory, militarism, empire, fascism, ethnic cleansing and globalisation.<sup>2</sup> The interview covers these various strands of Mann’s work and examines some of the methodological issues involved in conducting macro-level historical sociology and interdisciplinary work.

### George Lawson (GL)

Could we start by talking a little bit about your background, your early influences and so on.

### Michael Mann (MM)

Well, I read history as an undergraduate at Oxford, but I wasn’t a terribly good student. I didn’t really know what I was going to be. I decided that I would be a social worker or a probation officer, and I did a sociology course for the first time and really enjoyed it. I contingently came along General Food Corporation, who offered the Department of Social and Administrative Studies at Oxford University a research contract to study the relocation of a factory. The head of the department asked me if I would be interested in getting a PhD out of it, and so suddenly, rather than being a probation officer, I decided to do a PhD in sociology.

I did a ‘before and after’ interview survey of workers and managers of a company that moved from Birmingham to Banbury, and wrote about a combination of family and community sociology on the one hand, and industrial sociology on the other, without any great theoretical pretensions—it was all very empirical. Then I moved to Cambridge and worked in industrial sociology in the Department of Applied Economics before moving to Essex, where I was required to teach sociological theory and the Enlightenment.

While in Cambridge, I wrote a little book on class consciousness that was part of a wider comparative project—we were going to be studying factories in four different countries. So having taught Weber and Durkheim and having read most of them (much of which was for the first time—I was pretty ignorant until then), I began to ask myself

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to 1760 AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 2: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Major publications include: Michael Mann, ‘The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Nature, Causes and Consequences’ *European Journal of Sociology*, 25, no.2 (1984): 185–213, reprinted in John Hall (ed.), *States in History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 106–36; Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003); Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Michael Mann, ‘Has Globalisation Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation-State?’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, no.3 (1997): 472–96. For an overview of Mann’s work, see the various contributions in *An Anatomy of Power*, John Hall and Ralph Schroeder (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

theoretical questions and I wrote a paper, an unpublished paper in, I think, 1972, on putting together Marx and Althusser on the one hand, and Weber on the other, both with tripartite models of social structure, and developing from there. That was the genesis of *The Sources of Social Power*, which was originally meant to be one volume, a short and predominantly theoretical book with a couple of empirical case studies, one of which was going to be the ancient world and the Roman Empire. The project soon developed a life of its own, and so I started a gradual move towards bigger and bigger topics.

Let me say that at the same time, politically, I made a move leftwards (I suppose Left Labour but I was never a Marxist). This was a phase during which there was a very serious threat of nuclear war, and my views differed from those of all of my leftist friends who saw the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States as fundamentally about communism versus capitalism. I saw this as rather primitive and uninformed—it seemed to me that, whatever the ideological elements, it was also a great-power rivalry. So I was never part of a particularly conventional political grouping. Mine was a relatively independent form of leftism.

While I was in Colchester, I was on the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the representative of a ward (this was during the time that the Labour Party was being torn apart and when the Social Democrats were leaving). I found my role there to be among those people who were trying to hold the Colchester Labour Party together (quite unsuccessfully, it turned out, because it was destroyed by the Left). Indeed the present Member of Parliament for Colchester, Bob Russell, is a Liberal Democrat who was then the leading right-winger in the Colchester Labour Party, a very worthy local man. So there was always the influence of politics which kept me away from easy answers theoretically. Thereafter it was a gradual process of broadening out.

**GL**

Two things in what you've said seem worth picking up on. One is that history in a way was your first love and that seems to have stayed with you—the focus on detail and drawing theory from empirical facts rather than conducting research the other way round. And the second thing is the political interest and activism that you have obviously retained—perhaps we can talk about that later when we discuss your recent book on empire.

### *Historical Sociology*

**GL**

But first, can we talk a little bit about the method of comparative historical sociology itself? You've written and talked in the past about having a kind of Kantian 'as if' positivism which recognises, at least epistemologically, its own insecurity and yet retains a pragmatic belief in empirical research that's challengeable on the basis of how well you can explain social facts and how well you can organise them.

Now that leaves you open to two immediate critiques, the first from historians who say that they provide an 'entire study' in and of itself, that facts are all that there are and that we don't need any general organising picture that only works to distort the mess that is world history. The second critique is by more abstractly oriented people (I remember a Barrington Moore critique on this basis, i.e., that there is not enough theory in your work), and by those who work with general abstractions such as rational choice scholars who see theory as the generation or working through of timeless, invariant laws. How do you defend your approach against those charges?

**MM**

Well, I'm never happy talking about methodological issues—I am somewhat philistine about them. But both the positions that you've mentioned are really untenable. First, when historians study the multiplicity of facts, they are always importing theories and it is perfectly obvious, particularly once you get into middle age and you see fashions succeeding each other so that you know there was a time when historians were all writing about class and socialism, and now of course it's far more in the way of cultural stuff, that there are always organising principles and one is always seeing the world through theoretical filters. Nobody can do this without these processes entering into research, so I think that what social scientists should do is to make this explicit but then recognise that the world is going to be more complicated than the theoretical categories that we begin with, so that you have to bounce the two (theory and history) off each other.

And then my response to the people who develop abstract theories is that the world is always more complicated than these theories allow, plus there are specificities of time and place and historical development, and that these three things—time, place and historical development—have to be factored in. All of our theories of social change require some knowledge of history, for example. So, to take theories of globalisation as an example, ninety per cent of the writers on globalisation have no idea whatsoever about what the world was like fifty years ago, or even twenty-five years ago. The focus is on all the supposed changes of the last five minutes or so with a very simplistic notion of what the past was like. This illustrates how one has to have a detailed grasp of time, place and historical development.

#### **GL**

The means that you devise in order to weave a path between these two extremes—history and abstract theory—is the IEMP model. In doing so, you move from a Weberian tripartite scheme to one based on four fundamental sources of social power: ideological, economic, military and political power relations. Can you explain why this was and what pay-off you received from that?

#### **MM**

Well my model is not particularly original. The tripartite scheme is very common—it was what Structural Marxists like Althusser, for example, made explicit from Marxism itself. So my separation of the military is the main addition I have made, and I do it for both empirical and analytical reasons.

Empirically there are very many cases where military and political power can be distinguished—states which have very little military power but considerably higher levels of political, ideological and economic power (and vice versa). Plus, with the real autonomy of military castes, both within states and around states, there are many military forces which are empirically not very well connected to states. One cannot study ethnic cleansing without looking at paramilitaries, for instance.

Analytically too, I think it's important to recognise the distinctions which flow from these two discrete forms of power. One is based on authoritative regulation, which is scrutinised and very often legalised, and the other is about naked organised physical force—these are very different. To run the two together hides considerable differences between them.

#### **GL**

It's interesting that you mention separating out military power and that being the added value that you bring to the tripartite approach. Reading through your work—I know that you reject any story of ultimate primacy—it seems to me that there *is* some kind of implicit hierarchy in your general survey of the sources of social power that runs M-P-E-I. Is that reasonable?

**MM**

No, I don't think so. I'm rather empiricist and I haven't finished yet, so I will think more systematically about this later on, but I think that the four forms of power provide different capacities rather than work as a hierarchy or as a single scale.

So I think that economic power relations mostly mobilise the texture of everyday life as they involve people's subsistence and their basic practical activities. As I've just mentioned, political power relations are based on authoritative regulation. Ideological power relations tend to be able to mobilise movements during periods of rapid transformation and to involve a degree of emotional intensity—but this is erratic and irregular. For the most part, ideology is about the further institutionalisation or the reproduction of what is already there, so it is usually rather conservative. Military power enables conquest and therefore it is very important in some contexts where there is competition between different social groupings. It is the power relation that can grant formal victory and deliver certain predominant social relations thereafter. But military power cannot so easily penetrate everyday relations. Militaristic regimes repress deviants but they find it difficult to mobilise public opinion.

So, I haven't sorted it out yet but these are the kinds of things which make me think that you probably can't have a theory of primacy because the four sources of power have different logics and do different things.

**GL**

And because they are entwined and interconnected at a very fundamental level.

**MM**

Yes.

**GL**

In the second volume of *Sources* you say that ideological power relations are more immanent than transcendent and it made me think about your view that ideas are not free floating, that they don't do anything unless they are organised, hence the term often used to describe your work: organisational materialism.

But when we think about the norms and ideologies that were prevalent in the nineteenth century and their part in the making of the modern world, such as racism, Darwinism, colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, Marxism, or liberalism of various forms (even class itself has a dimension of immaterial or ideological power infused in its basic material power), in that sense are there not at least some dimensions of ideological power that were transcendent during this period rather than immanent?

**MM**

Well, I think that what you're saying is that ideological power as an autonomous form of power is transcendent, and yes that's the nature of it. Most people most of the time accept explanations of their own conditions via dominant ideologies. Most people don't live at a very ideological level but to the extent that they do, ideology is something that explains 'what is'. But transcendent ideology—there are both major ones and less major ones—arises when the socialisation of human beings is inadequate to the problems that confront them. There has to be a leap of some kind, a leap of understanding. The changes that are occurring at a practical level are in conflict with existing ideologies and therefore there is an articulation of a need for some new understanding.

**GL**

Some new form of meaning?

**MM**

Yes, this is when we find that ideologically driven elites (radical ideological elites), can articulate certain things. But I do stress that, for the most part, ideology is about how you cope with practical exigencies.

Take racism and empire, for example. How are Europeans to conceptualise their obvious superiority in power relations? You can't just have a racist ideology and expect to be able to rule peaceably over people. I'm not someone who thinks that Social Darwinism in the second half of the nineteenth century is something which is essentially responsible for racism in the advanced countries or in their empires—racism comes about earlier and through a number of sequences that relate to practical exigencies. If you want to enslave people, if you want to have a plantation economy in the New World and you can't get free labour, then slavery is very useful. You can't enslave the indigenous population, so you bring them in from Africa, and that's something that leads people to reflect on 'our' superiority to 'them', and leads to practical racism well before there is any concept of Social Darwinism.

So, for me, ideological power is more about social movements than about theories or the history of ideas. I don't think that the history of ideas can really be written without the intersection of material power.

**GL**

This all sounds as if ideas are following a functional need to impose meaning upon what is going on anyway. They seem to be following after the fact of the material situation whatever that may be—exploitation, slavery, the growth of nation-statism, the need to make war or whatever is the central story of the time.

**MM**

Yes, but once it emerges it can develop an autonomy, like fascism. Fascism offered an explanation of why Europe was in crisis after World War I, and provided a set of solutions to this crisis. This ideology, engrained in fascist movements and used by fascist leaders, led to profound consequences. In a certain way it led to a certain irrationality, as it were. It led to war and genocide. So it's an interstitial opening, an emergence. Ideology emerges in response to need but then can generate an autonomy. In this sense, it's a movement.

**GL**

The corollary of this point is that, by focusing on dominant ideologies rather than those ideologies, norms and ideas that seek to transcend and change the existing order, this is a necessary side effect of what happens when you focus on the 'leading edge' of power. So, if you are concerned primarily with despotic 'power over' and with infrastructural 'power through', then you're looking for legitimations of the existing order. But of course there is another side to power—'power to'—which is resistance to this order, the story of what Cynthia Enloe calls 'the silent, the marginal and the bottom rung' and the part that these people, groups and movements play in altering what is considered to be the leading edge of power.

**MM**

I suppose that I have been writing predominantly about the leading edge of power, and that therefore it's a consequence that I would tend to downplay the role of the losers! Now, of course, some of the losers become winners—there are revolutions. In the case of the failing

American Empire today, the insurgents have far more power than they thought they had, and that can be generalised across the world.

**GL**

Because they possess the weapons of the weak.

**MM**

Yes. I didn't know until I wrote the book (*Incoherent Empire*) that I was going to come out with this conclusion—that the revolution in military affairs has also benefited the weak. The Kalashnikov, the hand-propelled grenade launcher, the suicide bomber have all shifted the balance of power, certainly in terms of military power, rather remarkably right across the world.

**GL**

Let's talk for a minute about having a model of multiple causation, and about offering a middle-range analysis in and of itself. I'm very sympathetic to the view that this is social science in the sense that your work can be traced back to a tradition embracing Weber, Aron, C. Wright Mills and others, people involved in the type of broadening-out exercise you mentioned at the start.

Unfortunately, in International Relations and to some extent more widely across the social sciences, many people have a much narrower view of what theory is, i.e., that you need to create some kind of Lakatosian research programme replete with hardcore assumptions, auxiliary hypotheses, negative heuristics and the like that generate at least a sense of a cumulative build-up of knowledge. So, if you don't start with a sufficiently parsimonious, abstract hypothesis and work deductively towards proving or disproving it, you are seen as carrying out little more than interpretation.

In this sense of theory, any approach that starts with history and works with complex patterns of multi-causality will be reduced to 'analysis' in that it lacks a determinate social theory and fails to provide a finite, fixed ontological point of reference. Do you have any truck with this way of thinking or do you just get on with what you're doing and with what you think is the important task of social theory itself?

**MM**

Well I'm not an imperialist! I think that there are various enterprises with various possibilities within what we call social science. I'm not saying that everybody has to do the kind of thing that I do. I mean, we might say that the weakness of economists is that, by and large, they have such a limited range of variables that they're willing to consider, but at the same time it's also their strength, at least as long as it works. And so there is mileage to be got out of simplifying social life, in terms of a few variables and a kind of rigorous treatment of those variables, whether it's rational choice theory or whatever.

But it is important to realise that this way of seeing theory is also imprisoning research. Take the example of economies of growth—nowadays, it's been decided that institutions and technological development are the two key things that matter most for economic growth. Well economists don't have a theory of either! So one does need a broader kind of theory and a wider concept of what theory is.

Now, I mean, do I have a theory of the middle range? It's a pretty big middle range, but yes I suppose that I do. I am concerned with the same kind of things as Marx and Weber, which is the basic transformations of our times and how we understand those.

*Interdisciplinarity*

**GL**

The other side to this point is that, as well as having an account of multiple causality, multiple trajectories and historical development that is inevitably complex, you also work within different disciplines. Your work has taken in International Relations, obviously history, sociology and many other things—anthropology as well—and you’ve described this process as involving a kind of ‘looting and pillaging raid’ on these disciplines. It seems to me that the potential weakness of this approach is that one is drawn, at least in the first instance, towards the mainstream of other disciplines, which may mean missing out on the more interesting stuff that is submerged within.

For example, you’ve spoken about how in the early 1980s, sociologists like yourself were looking for a theory of the state, which they found in IR realism, while some IR scholars were rejecting the rational unitary vision of states and state autonomy and were looking towards sociology for help, which some of them found in structuralism. In this instance, both found the other discipline’s principal orthodoxy just as they were being abandoned or at least critically challenged. Do you think that’s something inherent to interdisciplinary work?

**MM**

I’m not sure whether that is a necessary characteristic of interdisciplinary work. I think that in the case that you mentioned, though it was true for a short period of time, sociologists soon realised that states were not single actors. And if I didn’t know that immediately, it was because I wasn’t concentrating very hard!

I am a sociologist before I am anything else, but I’m an unconventional sociologist—a classical sociologist. Most of the discipline is not concerned with what I’m concerned with. So I don’t see why I should be particularly or necessarily attracted to the mainstream in other disciplines except in so far as my own pillaging raids require it.

Take Japanese imperial history, for example. Now, I’m going to be reading the basic material in translation, and I have no independent store of knowledge about the Japanese Empire. And so I suppose that in some ways I am looking for a consensus view, or at least I don’t want to go for too quirky a view. Rather, I want a view which provides the best general overview on Japanese Empire. But it’ll always get interpreted in terms of my more general approach. Very often you’re not terribly interested in internal debates or the main squabbles going on in terms of revisionism and whatever—it’s not what you want from history. So you’re not necessarily going for the main debates of the time; rather you are pillaging for something particular in relation to your own theory.

**GL**

So it is a functional or instrumental reading in which you’re looking for something in particular and you’re willing to let these internal squabbles go on.

**MM**

That’s right. So as far as IR is concerned, I’m not particularly adept with the current range or fads in IR theory. My reading is a more selective appropriation of things that seem interesting to me. So I’m not interested in, for example, constructivism as sociology took a cultural turn some while ago and I’ve seen constructivism in different guises. I think that by now I know what’s useful about it and what isn’t, so I’m rather uninterested overall in this recent trend in IR theory.

**GL**



On the IR dimension of these pillaging raids, some of your work can seem strikingly realist. On reading articles like ‘Capitalism and Militarism’ which delve into hegemonic stability and patterns of polarity and so on, one comes across statements like ‘when states neglect their militarism they perish’, and I was thinking as I read it that this sentence could have been written by Martin Wight.<sup>3</sup> Your general view of the international is largely characterised by geopolitical conflict mitigated by diplomacy, in soft and hard forms, which sounds like realism-lite or like an English school approach to IR theory. Is that right?

### MM

I think to some extent it’s a kind of shorthand. If you delve into something, like the second volume of *Sources* that is concerned with the causes of World War I, and you know that there are various states—that is, you know that the war is a decision taken by state elites and that’s the authoritative power that they possess and that when these leaders declare war, people are constrained by that—then that is an important realist point to make about modern states, if not about all states. But to do a proper explanation of World War I, you’d have to go into detail on half-a-dozen of these states, and I go into some detail on the German case, and in that case I’m breaking apart the notion of a single unitary state actor. There is a final single decision, but I note the various influences at work and the pressure of various social groupings that make up that final decision. So I break things apart a bit.

I think much of this depends on context. At the moment I’m thinking more about empires, and empires are clearly the product, not merely and often not predominantly, of state action. There are all kinds of adventurers and trading groups and religious groups who are involved in this enterprise and they have important power resources. They have the ability to constrain governments. And so the actual explanation of empire is not confined to the relationship between states, however factionalised they might be.

### GL

And yet there’s another dimension to how much your story could be considered to be an essentially realist one or perhaps ontologically reductionist in the international realm in that it’s focusing primarily on geopolitics and militarism. Historical sociology in International Relations has focused its attack on the realist assertion of timelessness, on the idea that there is some eternal anarchic system that generates interstate conflict by necessity, and that security and the struggle for survival are therefore higher order, endemic and unchanging features of the international realm. So the focus for historical sociologists has been on the *changing* forms of international systems over time and space, change rather than continuity, and to some extent on periodisation, with a view to assessing how the international and the domestic landscapes and their constituent actors vary.

In your work, you concentrate on the interplay or the dialectic between empires of domination (which we’d probably think of as a form of hierarchy in IR terms), and multi-actor power civilisation (which seems like a kind of anarchic society—another reason why I was struck by your closeness to an English school view of the international realm). So the international, then, is primarily a realm of geopolitics and militarism within what appears to be a rather timeless, or at least only a dual, international system. There is comparatively little room for the spread of the market, revolutionary internationalism, the role of various international ideologies or the multitude of other forms that the international takes throughout world history.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Mann, ‘Capitalism and Militarism’ in *War, State and Society*, Martin Shaw ed. (London: MacMillan, 1984), 25–46.

The result is that the content of the international seems to rest most strongly on the 'M' part of IEMP rather than on the other sources of power which also very clearly have an international dimension.

### MM

Well I think that I would be a little more hesitant to talk about this kind of dialectic between empires of domination and multi-state civilisations now. Things are a bit more complex than that. I also wouldn't see multi-state civilisations as being anarchic. I think these are essentially arenas in which there *is* some normative sense of community of some kind, which means that the states within are not completely separate units. And also, these empires and multi-state civilisations lived with each other and influenced one another and did deals with each other. So the Phoenicians were city-states really and for a large part were intermediaries between the Assyrians and other empires.

I think that IR has traditionally thought, and realist IR especially, of the international arena as being one essentially of geopolitics. That clearly isn't enough and quite obviously there has been a reaction within IR making exactly this point. The growth of the recent phase of globalisation has been the spur to this alongside recognition of the growth of a broader capitalist production which is not merely international but significantly transnational as well. There is also more consciousness now of the importance of transmission through cultural networks. So I think that the space between, or the relations between and across states, has a much more diverse basis than was traditionally conceived of by IR scholars or sociologists.

But then you see that, within the tradition of sociology, there was always a dual tradition. The way that my cohort of graduate students was taught is that there were societies and these were thought of explicitly in terms of nation-states. But there was also another society, which was industrial society and capitalist society. So we were never really imprisoned with only one way of seeing these things. That's what enabled me to make statements such as 'there is no such thing as society, only multiple networks of interaction'. So, in some ways, this is quite a traditional sociological mode of analysis. But I'm not sure that I'm answering your question!

### GL

Let me tease it out a bit more. What do you think that International Relations is, or, more specifically, what does it offer you? Is the essence of IR about the occurrence and reoccurrence of war and peace, about geopolitics, about adding an additional data set to what you already do? Or is it about something more than this, about challenging, for example, the theoretical foundations of your enterprise?

IEMP is a very interesting way of focusing on the *multidimensionality* of the international and asking what this would mean for sociology and for the study of domestic processes of social change. In which case, studying the international adds some *constitutive* value to the enterprise of comparative historical sociology itself. Have you, do you think, successfully built in this wider view of the international into your work? And to what extent do you think that IR itself offers more than merely the M in the IEMP model?

### MM

Well maybe in response to your earlier question about the sense in which I take the conventional path, the mainstream of a discipline, it may well be that the military dimension is what IR has to offer me. And I think it remains true—here one has to be very careful—but I think it is true that there are some features of relations between states which are repetitive, if not timeless.

Take the example of empires. There may be different types of empires: overseas empires and land-based empires, stand-alone empires like the Chinese Empire, and rivalrous empires where there are multiple imperial rivalries. Yet there are some regularities involved in all these instances. I expect IR to pursue them relatively rigorously even though I know there is a big attack, a sociological attack on them, saying that they function in very different ways according to the social structure in question. That is true, but I can figure that out for myself.

**GL**

Right, so again we're back to this sort of functional, instrumental reading. You're happy that the discipline is wider and broader than realism and you accept that, but you take what you need, and if that's what you take then so be it.

**MM**

Yes. Say, for example, that I'm thinking about war and why Europeans were so warlike because of the frequency of war in European history, and where you have multi-state systems elsewhere—Latin America has very few wars, similarly postcolonial Africa has lots of wars but very few interstate wars, and Asia as well—now I would like some serious quantitative studies of these. I'm suggesting something but I can't prove it. So I would like some serious quantitative studies of other parts of the world so that I can see whether this is true and then I can begin to try to explain why Europeans were so warlike.

**GL**

So the point is that you could use the data, for example that being generated on the democratic peace, which you would then use to draw fundamentally different conclusions but which would help your overall project. So you search for the raw material being provided by other disciplines, look for what you need in it but don't necessarily embrace the conclusions.

**MM**

That's right.

*States*

**GL**

Another point to bring in here might be your work on the state. You've talked about states being polymorphous and crystallising in various ways and that obviously supports the type of point historical sociologists in IR would make, that there are different types of political units in different epochs and in different places that act according to their historically situated, particular logic.

**MM**

Yes.

**GL**

But beneath this point is the idea that a state is a state is a state, that they all derive their autonomy out of necessity, that there is always territorial centralisation, that there is still, if you like, some embodiment of basic statehood that one can treat as an actor in its own right, whatever adjective you put in front of it.

Is that, do you think, what International Relations must start off by accepting—if not because it's necessarily always empirically right but because heuristically what else can we do except acknowledge this shorthand means for doing theoretical work?

**MM**

Yes, I think that's right with one or two provisos. Politics can be more or less statelike. For example, many of the states in the world today do not have effective sovereignty over their own territories. There are many different kinds of state. But yes, there is something fundamental that is underpinning all of these forms of political association.

*Empire*

**GL**

Can we move on now to talk about some of your recent research on empire, the dark side of democracy and so on?

Starting with empire, you make the point that you don't go along with the Emmanuel Todd thesis that the US is not an empire or will not be not an empire for very long because of its own domestic weaknesses or because of the likelihood of a countervailing force or because of imperial overstretch. You've made the point that the US Empire is actually stillborn, that it's incoherent, that the mission (the new mission) for imperialism is fundamentally incoherent because 'the U.S. is a military giant, an economic back seat driver, a political schizophrenic and an ideological phantom'.<sup>4</sup> Can you just say a little bit more about how you came to that description?

**MM**

Well I came to that *conclusion* from two general points drawn from my previous work. One from the *Sources of Social Power* is that in order to actually exercise power in general terms one needs some combination of all four kinds of power: economic, ideological, military and political. Now, one doesn't need to have an equivalent amount of each, but one needs to have more than just military power alone. That's the first point. The second point is my conviction that this is no longer the age of empires, but the age of nation-states.

Now I would qualify these in certain ways and, in fact, as the Iraq venture has gone on, the US has realised the truth of the first statement and now has a political strategy which it didn't have before. It still doesn't have a genuine ideological strategy—democratisation is something that appeals to its own domestic constituency rather than to the people of Iraq. It now has a traditional political strategy of empire. And now that I know much more about American history and previous periods (my comparisons previously were mainly with the British Empire and the Roman Empire about which I knew a fair amount and I saw that the US was by no means similar to these), I can see that there are different kinds of empire: direct empire, indirect, informal, and then there is hegemony, which is not strictly empire.

The US in the twentieth century, after the Philippines went bad, has been much more concerned with informal empire, though laced with networks of bases and intermittent punitive interventions (there were thirty-two punitive and military interventions by the United States between 1899 and 1929, for example, just about one a year, in order to keep client states on the right path). Then there was a phase in which the US went for the policy of 'sons of bitches', that is as Cordell Hull, the former Secretary of State, put it (there is some argument about whether he was talking about Somoza or Trujillo) but he said, 'he may be a son of a bitch but he's *our* son of a bitch', where you work through proxies. This was the

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003).

predominant form of control during the Cold War (to begin with, of course, the Cold War was rather hot because there was Korea and there was Vietnam, and there were various other instances of fighting going on, but it gradually settled more into fighting through proxies). But again, this tended to weaken. So I see structural adjustment programmes as the corollary of the dollar diplomacy of an earlier period, except that it didn't come about by punitive interventions—it's purely economic coercion along the lines of, 'if you do this, nothing bad will happen to you. If you don't, you can't pay your debts'.

So there was a drift, as in empires in general, towards milder and milder forms of control. And that's what the US has tried to buck in its Middle-Eastern policy because it is seeking if not a permanent empire then a very tough form of informal empire with bases throughout the region and periods of interventions when necessary. I don't think that this will achieve anything.

**GL**

And it can't achieve anything for two reasons. One is that the IEMP equation doesn't add up. And the second point is that the macro-context won't allow it, because we are in the age of nation-states rather than the age of imperialism. In that case there can't be any empires in the contemporary world, or at least any in the formal sense that you were talking about.

**MM**

Yes.

**GL**

One additional point I took from *Incoherent Empire* was that the reason why there can't be empires in the contemporary world is because states can't be nasty enough. They can't oppress populations in the way that they did before, in that Guantanamo Bay may be bad but it's hardly on a par with the imperial slaughters of a hundred years ago and so on.

**MM**

Yes. And also, because the insurgents have more powerful ideologies than they used to, punitive actions infuriate them rather than pacify them. You have less ability to divide insurgents than through the punitive activities of the past.

**GL**

Two other points that struck me about *Incoherent Empire* was that, first, it was overtly political, which seemed to mark some type of return to where we started—your politically motivated work in the early 1970s—and I just wonder whether you felt that you needed to make a political statement at this juncture, why that was and how that was received in the United States.

And second, you talk about part of the current problem in Iraq and with the US more generally as being the elevation of values to the political realm, and that the second-best world of political action should always be governed by prudence rather than by overt norms. So the real danger seems to lie in the fusion of ideological power with political power, and that seems to lead on to your work on fascism and ethnic cleansing. Is that right?

**MM**

Yes. Since I moved to the US, I have obviously been much less politically engaged than I was in Britain. I'm in an alien country. I've only been a citizen since 1999, and *Incoherent Empire* welled up rather quickly out of my horror and anger at what was going on in the two countries in which I had citizenship. It hasn't gone down terribly well in the US. I would

have hoped for broader circulation—it was circulated among the left in the United States, but not more generally. It's been more successful around other parts of the world and has been through a number of translations.

Then there is the question of the dangerous blend of ideology, political power and transformation. Yes, that's what's common in fascism, in ethnic cleansing and in contemporary American policy. I've become much more Machiavellian about what morality is—that you can't have morals unless they can be made to work. What we find in almost all American interventions is they don't start off with high moral values. They start off with a more realist or prudential idea of national interest but then become converted into ethical ventures. This has happened again in Iraq, though in this case the proponents of the war were more ideological than is usually the case (although they didn't express this openly at first). Of course, if you can't achieve your aims, then the action is going to be immoral—it will do more damage and kill more people, and there's going to be more chaos as a result.

### *The Dark Side of Democracy*

#### **GL**

Moving from this last point to the books on fascism and ethnic cleansing, there seem to be more parallels in what you are saying about empire and your work on the dark side of democracy. For example, you make the point that fascism was in some ways a rational response to a systemic crisis but also a principled ideology in that it had a strong sense of virtue and morality. In fact, it is that cocktail—of reasoned response to a crisis fused with a concept of virtue (as laid out by apologists such as Carl Schmitt)—that gave fascism its real force, hence the shared fascistic vision of an organic nationalism, a radical state, and so on.

That seems to mean that there is a family resemblance between fascism, ethnic cleansing and perhaps empire as well, with the fundamental point being that none of these is a sideshow to modernity, or democracy or 'civilisation', but that they are at the very heart of liberal democracy.

But isn't it those states which are most heavily institutionalised in liberal democracy that have some kind of proof against fascism and murderous cleansing? So, in that case, is the villain of the piece essentially nation-statism, particularly when it is fused with an overdose of moral purpose, rather than democracy? Or are we really talking about something intrinsic to democracy itself?

#### **MM**

Well, of course, I'm going to have to spend a lot of time defending and explaining the title *The Dark Side of Democracy*. I'm not asserting that democracies directly commit ethnic cleansing, except in the case of settlers who want the land but not the labour, and that is the situation in which they are—colonial regimes—most murderous. So it is the settlers who are the most murderous. Their stake is in the local situation, and they are relatively unrestrained by the colonial government.

#### **GL**

So, because of the distances involved, there's a genuine autonomy for those groups on the ground.

#### **MM**

That's right, and the more the settlers are in control of things, the more murderous they are.

Now, I don't think that's true about advanced countries themselves, and I don't think that it's a characteristic of American democracy that these things are going on in Iraq. I think

that, by and large, and this links up various things I've said, that the most dangerous situations come from instability, when unstable states are beset by crises (often caused by wider geopolitical crises), where there is factionalism within the domestic polity, where radicals can challenge incumbents, and where they can generate more violent 'solutions' to these problems. That's more of a general situation than one rooted in either democracy or authoritarianism. I think that stable democracies *and* stable authoritarian regimes are less dangerous than unstable ones.

**GL**

But many stable regimes have performed horrific atrocities, particularly when this is linked to an extreme form of authoritarian nation-statism: Nazism, Stalinism or the Khmer Rouge ...

**MM**

No, I don't think that those regimes were particularly stable. There is a radicalisation process that people have noted, for instance, about the Nazis, but the Nazis were the most extreme example of an elite securely in power that continued to radicalise. The most murderous communist state was the Khmer Rouge, which emerged in the midst of a civil war and which believed that it was beset by all kinds of enemies. So, again, it's not a stable regime—it's instability that leads to the most difficulties.

**GL**

So your warning seems to be about change and instability—taking the example of democratisation, some people have studied the dangers of democratisation, particularly when it's done very quickly or when it involves a double transformation of economic systems and polities at the same time.

But are you also making a wider, broader attack on, if you like, Western civilisation itself, in that you're following here a tradition of Weber and Adorno, the Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt, Mark Mazower, and so on, arguing that modernity and liberal democracy themselves contain within them certain dangers? So forget the democratic peace and be aware that murderous killing is at the heart of Western growth and development rather than something that happens out there to someone else or is somehow exceptional?

**MM**

Yes—murderous killing is at the heart of our civilisation, and each civilisation has its own dangers. I've become rather relativist in thinking about progress. Is there progress? Well, in some senses, of course, the answer is yes. But in each sequence of what we might call progress there are new problems and new dangers, and a new dark side. So each society or social order has to solve its distinctive problems.

There is a strong historical argument in my ethnic cleansing book which says that people killed each other with very great frequency in previous epochs. But they tended not to commit ethnic cleansing of the kind that modern societies do because ethnic cleansing only really becomes an issue when we have the notion of rule by the people. This is the confusion of the *ethnos* with the *demos*. So, while fascism is clearly about nation-statism, underpinning it is an ideal. And this ideal is rule by the people. It takes many different forms, including fascism, which is, of course, an anti-democratic form.

The point is that, in times of instability (when there is a generally perceived crisis where it's unclear what should happen), this is a context when ideologies appear that offer extreme 'solutions' to problems, 'solutions' which often involve violence. This is where the danger of extremist ideologies without thought of consequences comes from and when

Machiavellian principles no longer rule. This is when the notion of the heaven, the will and the force of the people can overcome all obstacles, the triumph over everything.

In a way, this is common to the Nazis, to Leninist or to Maoist interpretations of Marxism, to the Khmer Rouge and in a much milder way to the neocons in the United States. But much milder, I emphasise, as I don't want to compare them with the Nazis!

## GL

Again we have this link between macro-context, social action, various forms of social organisation and then what is transcendent and how different sources of power interweave and intertwine in a particular process or in a dynamic of world-historical development.

In the third volume of *Sources*, which is on its way, the macro-context seems to be globalisation, which clearly has all sorts of consequences for social organisation, political action, and so on. You've made the point that globalisation is multiple, contradictory and violent, and has a dark side to it (every macro-context or every civilisation seems to have this dark side or its contradictory element).

But when I look at what you've written about globalisation, you make the point, as with empire, that the picture as served up by the IEMP model is uneven, that what is global is matched by what is international, national, transnational and, indeed, sometimes local. Why then describe the macro-context as globalisation at all?

## MM

Well that's a very good question, and let me first of all explain that this third volume is still some way off, and that I'm still grappling with certain things. It may be that, in fact, the volume is split into two, with the first part about empires and the second part about globalisation.

Let me say that I'm increasingly unhappy with the standard writing on globalisation. The core of it seems to be a supposed contradiction between nation-states and something else, call it globalisation. Well, I don't see any weakening of nation states. On the other hand, I do see a greater amount of activity in terms of the intensification of social relations around the world, which you might want to call globalisation. So I do see an increasing intensification and density to social relations, just not at the expense of nation-states because states are actually becoming more invasive of our lives. The point is that this is going on at the same time as some broader, sometimes global, processes that are also becoming more invasive of our lives.

So, that said, I think one could defend the use of the term 'globalisation' and 'global' relations if our social relations had reached the limits of the planet and then were bouncing back to influence us. And I think we've definitely reached that in at least two areas—weaponry (nuclear weapons and the like) and, the environment. In these two areas, the global provides a constraint that changes social life. Clearly IR people know that nuclear weaponry changed a great deal about the way that states related to each other. But the environment is something else entirely.

Now, you can also say that there are many other processes—that capitalism and culture, for example, are becoming more global—but I would hesitate a little here because I find that almost any generalisation one can make still has to have a geographical reference. We may be talking about the North of the world or the South, or about continents, or about smaller regions, such as the way that Nordic countries do things differently to the way that Anglo-Saxon liberal countries do things. So you have to do an awful lot of geographical qualifying of things that are often considered to be global but turn out to be exaggerations.

On the other hand, the overall configuration is one that is far more global than it ever was in the past, even though this has quite a long historical sequence. One might say that in



terms of nature, the environment, diet and things like that, the big impact is from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century rather than more recently. And the conquest of almost all of the world by a relatively small number of empires; this was a segmented form of globalisation. So it still makes sense to talk about globalisation, but only given these caveats.

**GL**

Michael Mann—thank you very much.

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