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David Singh Grewel, **Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization**, Yale University Press, 2008, 416 pp., $20.45 (hardcover), $18.00 (paperback).

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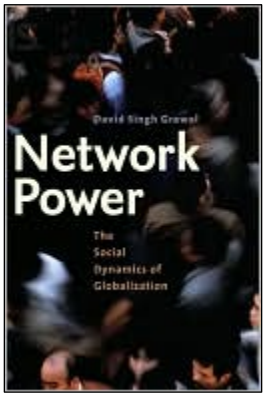

Though explicitly concerned with issues of globalization, David Singh Grewal's theory of network power turns out to be a much more ambitious project, focusing on the way networks themselves work and how they evolve. The book follows a clear path beginning with theory, then progressing through abstract analysis, culminating in detailed applications of the theory to real-life examples. This pattern not only describes the structure of the book's chapters, it is repeated with every argument made.

The first four chapters deal purely with theory, creating the scaffolding for the arguments he intends to make about globalization. In them, Grewal moves the audience through the origins, mechanisms, and implications of network power. From there, he proceeds to lay out a model for analyzing those implications, and how to deal with the consequences of problematic results. In the end, he brings home the argument with its application to issues of globalization and its implications for the future.

The first chapter is dedicated to defining his terms, constructing the scaffolding upon which the theory will be built. It begins, logically, with the definition of a network: "A *network* is united by a *standard*, which is a shared norm or practice that facilitates cooperation among members of a network" (p. 10). A network's *power* is the amount of real and potential influence exerted by that standard in *relation to others*. They exert influence primarily by virtue of their size, growing, if they can, toward universality.

A universal standard, while all-encompassing, is nigh invisible for that very reason; when everything is done a certain way, it is simply the way things are. Standards, he notes, are most visible when they are partial—a fact central to his analysis of modern-day fears about globalization.

Networks may be formed by reason, force, or chance, singly or in combination. However they arise, their standards are **maintained** through *sovereignty*—that is, force exerted downward from an authority as "collective consent to collective circumstances from which then follow implications for the individuals constituting the sovereign" (p. 48). Or, network standards are maintained through *sociability*—patterns of "decentralized, individual decisions . . . taken together, nonetheless conduce to a circumstance that affects the entire group" (p. 9). Though the effects of sovereign power are more immediately obvious, the true strength of network power lies in the dynamics of sociability. Not merely a property of individual interactions, social pressure can (and does) move corporations, coalitions, and even countries.

Despite the fact that ". . . in relations of sociability, individual[s] **consent** to individual circumstances which are, of course, determined by the choices of others" (p. 48, *emphasis mine*), social

power may constrain choice as severely as any overt exercise of sovereign power. Grewal dedicates the entirety of Chapter 4's "Power & Choice in Networks" to questions of freedom, agency, force, domination, and the murky distinctions between coerced and voluntary action.

Since the power of a network depends primarily on its size, the larger it grows, the more pressure there is to join. Members of more powerful networks enjoy access to more peers and resources by virtue of their larger population. In many cases, members may even gain or retain access to the less powerful network(s). As the power of a standard grows, the extrinsic forces of social pressure eclipse any intrinsic reasons to choose the network, and alternatives are pushed past the point of marginality. With such a profound power imbalance, users are relegated to a Hobson's choice: One may either choose a network that functions or a network that doesn't even exist. Though no explicit force or coercion may be at work, choice is nevertheless constrained.

So is network power good or bad? It may seem like an odd question, but for Grewal the *effects* of network power are as important, if not more so, as the mechanisms by which it operates; hence, his concern with both the material interests of distributive justice—"the freedom to get what you need"—and the representational stakes for members' identity—"the freedom to become who you are"(p. 164). While one desire may eclipse the other for a given actor at a given time, there will almost always be elements of both in the making. Accumulation of material wealth is as much about status and identity as it is about survival and self-interest; the ability to properly represent one's self depends as much on having the resources to do so as the skill and will to self-presentation.

Looking at the analytical frameworks for identity concerns and distributive interests independently, Grewal finds them to be incomplete ,and chooses instead to frame the issue(s) in terms of *justice*, where perforce the most desirable outcome is one in which *all* parties benefit.

Unfortunately, completely fair and beneficial outcomes are relatively rare. Power imbalances can cause effects ranging from merely annoying to nigh catastrophic; just as changes in the relative influence of a particular social networking service may eventually pressure users to switch, as may changes in the relative influence of military factions eventually pressure politicians to initiate wars.

When it becomes clear that the situation is unfair, or abusive, members (and holdouts, if any exist) may want to change it. How does one fight the tides of network power? The answer is: One doesn't. No matter the situation, network power will always be at work. The solution to negative outcomes, then, lies not in negating the *force* of network power, but in ameliorating or redirecting its *effects*.

Sovereign power seems to be the obvious solution. When a situation is untenable, a force with the power to direct action can unilaterally work to correct it. New standards may be proposed and enacted, redirecting action away from the existing, problematic ones. The new networks supplant the old; everyone under sovereign rule is now a member, whether they like it or not.

Rather than countering force with force—a solution which will almost always result in trouble for someone—Grewal proposes methods for diffusing the force of network power:

> [The] most effective way to defuse network power is to provide alternative and multiple channels for such access, thereby refusing to privilege just one. […] in short, to counter

> the power of a dominant standard, we need to open up access to its network in a way that does not require outsiders to abandon their standards. (p. 172)

With more choices and fewer costs involved in exercising those choices, **actors** are subject to less pressure from any one network while power imbalances are less likely to become overwhelming.

The rest of the book delves deeply into its effects on technology, trade, neoliberalism and cultural convergence. Through this, one central theme emerges: Though things seem in crisis from the rapid rise, convergence, and fall of standards the world over, this is simply the normal way of things writ large. Our major networks, universal though they may seem,[1] are rendered visible and fragile in their global partiality.

For all its virtues, Grewal's work is not without its faults, perhaps the biggest of which is the sometimes overwhelming level of detail involved. The writing continually moves from explanation to abstraction, demonstration, and finally reintegration. Readers lacking academic background in any of the diverse fields the theory draws on (e.g., history, philosophy, economics, psychology, and communication) may quickly find themselves lost, despite the book's friendly and accessible prose.

When positing his own theories or commenting on others' work, he suggests options and then build bridges to other ideas. Every explanation borders on becoming a subsection of theory that branches out into a densely interlinked model that belies the book's seeming simplicity. This trait makes the book exciting, inspiring, and a bit infuriating.

The interjection of Grewal's explicit political perspective may prove off-putting, appearing suddenly in the middle of a book that had, until this point, been a largely apolitical discussion of theory. This results from a theoretical sticking point for him. As he constructs it, the process of social structuration is so naturalized—an inevitable, inherent, unstoppable fact of life as socially connected beings—that the consequences of this socialization read as simply "The way things are." By this reckoning, unjust outcomes are as desirable as just ones. Since social network power is the aggregate of individual choices, what happens must reflect the desire of the group as a whole (or at least a significant proportion thereof). The system is thus working as intended.

This conclusion is profoundly unacceptable to Grewal, and he brings his personal ethics to bear in the form of the evaluative framework and counteractive strategies in Chapters 5 and 6. All of the examples that follow bear the same stamp—at the end of each analysis, he adds his predictions and hopes for the future, as well as any advice he can give for bringing those changes to fruition. Although like-minded readers may find these arguments common sense, possibly not even noticing the mixture of personal perspective and theoretical structure, readers who disagree will be unable to ignore the ideological overtones.

Though imperfect, *Network Power* is nevertheless an excellent book. Straightforward and well written, it not only succeeds in establishing a framework to analyze issues of contemporary globalization, but does so in a way that opens up avenues for exploration of a wide range of other topics.

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[1] See Chapter 3, "English and Gold," for an in-depth look at (functionally) universal standards.