

NAVARRA CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Book Review:

The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook

By Niall Ferguson

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History is the sum of what historians and power have included in it. The well-known historian Niall Ferguson calls it the “tyranny of the archives.” And as a result of his previous books, Ferguson’s central thesis in *The Square and the Tower* is that “social networks have always been much more important in history than most historians, fixated as they have been on hierarchical organizations such as states, have allowed.”

Without deepening very much in the explanation of his theory, this historian offers a reinterpretation of the structures that have decided history the most: the point of view of more horizontal networks instead of the perspective of hierarchical institutions (kingdoms, empires, states, armies...), that are more common in historiography.

The nine chapters are full of examples. To illustrate some of those, Ferguson uses network graphs, brought from social network analysis, which he had applied before, especially in his first of two volumes of a Henry Kissinger’s biography based on his private papers.

The book about the former Secretary of State of the United States, as the author says, was based on one question: how did he become practically the most powerful person in the world? His answer: networking. So, if one of the most important politicians in the twentieth century became so powerful because of networking, how many other times it has happened? What has been then the true importance of networks on the most decisive chapters of history?

With the attractive of our networked and hyperconnected era, Ferguson takes those questions also to stretch in history a current reality, showing that the digital revolution is not something totally new. “Internet is the new public square,” he writes, and public squares, or equivalents, have been there since the human being started to organize itself in society.

At the same time, *The Square and the Tower* is a result of networking: in the preface, Ferguson describes himself as “not a very hierarchical person” but “more of a networks guy.” And the book could be considered also a network itself, with examples from several times and places linked to a central idea.

The Illuminati, the arrival of explorers to other lands, the so-called Republic of Letters, revolutions as the achievement of networks and “wordsmiths”, the role of Freemasons since the lately seventeenth century, the pentarchies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, terrorism and Silicon Valley are some examples that Ferguson gives to prove his point. And of course, it’s curious to have Napoleon, Pizarro, Mark Zuckerberg and much more in the same book, but all those examples don’t explain the evolution or changes of the main issue. Taking one of Ferguson’s ideas: the number and types of connections in a network are not as important as its solidity.

For sure, networks have always existed. In fact, networks have been studied at least since the nineteenth century in social and natural sciences. Specifically, Sociology has studied power and general social networks. In History, even though the word “networks” is more recent,

there have been publications perfectly related to that concept.

For example, the French historian Maurice Agulhon, a disciple of the prestigious Ernest Labrousse, was an expert on *Histoire de la sociabilité* (the history of sociability), in which he studied how religious and political social groups were formed in France's republican history. Two of his most famous works in this area are *Penitents and Freemasons* (1968) and *The Circle in Bourgeois France* (1977).

Also, concepts like "circulation of ideas" and "cultural transferences" are quite common in History when it comes to studying how culture is developed in societies, especially with its democratization in the last two centuries. For example, in the *Journal of Contemporary History Hispania Nova* (2016), from the Carlos III University of Madrid, Dr. Raquel Sánchez García coordinates an article which title translates *Circulation of Ideas and Cultural Transferences: Spain and Europe in the 19th Century*, where other recent publications on these topics are mentioned.

In that framework, the novelty of the book for History is not the role of networks itself, because no one denies their importance, but for the author, historiography does it indirectly. Therefore, Ferguson's contribution with this book is more a statement and a call for attention about the primacy of networks over hierarchies.

"It proposes a new historical narrative, in which major changes [...] can be understood, in essence, as disruptive challenges, passed to established hierarchies by networks," he writes.

However, even though the idea of a new narrative can arouse curiosity and invite to think on what we know about history, it is also a risky attempt because he can give the (possibly wrong) impression of the desire of a totalizer explanation of history.

Another risk (or opportunity) comes when he compares different phenomena, like the impact of Gutenberg's printing press with the impact of the Internet, which can state a certain

anachronical perspective, or maybe led the debate about "comparing the incomparable" continue.

The alternative that can be the proposal for a "new historical narrative" is almost as mainstream as the main narratives that could be found in historiography: for more than one hundred years, historians have been looking for new narratives to write about beyond politics (or hierarchies, basically), which puts Ferguson's book novelty as a shake of history's tree in the tradition of seeking for offering something new.

About the author:

Niall Ferguson (1964) is a British historian and conservative political analyst. He is currently a Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, at Stanford University, and a senior fellow of the Center for European Studies, in Harvard. Ferguson, specialized in international, financial and economic history, has written other fourteen books. The most recent ones are: *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*; *High Financier: The Lives and Times of Sigmund Warburg*; *Civilization: The West and the Rest*; *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*; *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*, and *Kissinger: 1923-1968: The Idealist*. He is a columnist of the Sunday Times and the Boston Globe, founder and managing director of the Cambridge-based advisory firm Greenmantle LLC and is married to the author and women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali.