Network Power

By Mathilda Shepard | August 17, 2017

Network Power refers to the power exercised by some social actors over others via rules of inclusion and coordination within networks. Although the idea that power operates in networks has deep roots in the field of social network analysis that emerged in the 1930s with the work of Jacob Moreno (Victor, Montgomery and Labell 2017; Freeman 2004), the term "network power" first appeared in David Singh Grewal's article "Network Power and Globalization" (2003). Arguing that the Weberian "authoritarian power of command" paradigm does not adequately explain the mechanisms of domination in the era of globalization, Grewal instead proposes that dominance is secured via the "convergence on a set of common global standards" governed by network power (89).

The *standards* identified by Grewal (2003; 2008), which determine who gets to participate in a given network and on what terms, fall into two broad classes: *mediating standards*, such as language, and *standards for membership*, which encompass the rules and criteria used by members of a group to control access to their network. By applying these concepts to the specific case of the World Trade organization (WTO), Grewal casts the global entity's numerous international agreements as a unified standard for membership that enables it to exercise network power in coordinating multilateral trade. Since the WTO's dominance in the realm of global trade makes it difficult (and in some cases unfeasible) for states to opt out, the membership process is indirectly coercive in nature, a characteristic which Grewal extends to other networks that possess transnational power (2003, 93-95).

Following Grewal, Manuel Castells (2011) further theorizes the mechanisms of network power as they operate on a global scale. Incorporating ideas from his earlier work *The Rise of the Network Society*, ([1996] 2010), Castells advances a theory of network power based on the idea that the contemporary world is structured as a *global network society* in which power is wielded through an infinite number of interconnected networks. According to this framework, network power exists in relation to three other kinds of power that operate within networks:

1). *Networking power,* or the power of actors within networks over those outside networks;

2). *Networked power*, which refers to the power of some actors over others within the network; and

3). *Network-making power*, the capacity to program and switch networks (Castells 2011, 773).

In Castells' model, power is concentrated in the hands of *programmers* and *switchers*. These are not individuals, but rather human subnetworks that exercise network-making power, which is considered to be "the paramount form of power in the network society" (777). Whereas programmers have the ability to constitute, dissolve and set the agenda for a

particular network, switchers are able to connect different networks in a way that enables cooperation for the mutual benefit of each one. Central to this power dynamic are multimedia communications networks, which allow programmers access to the neural networks in the human mind. The owners of global multimedia networks thus belong to the power-holding class in the network society, but these individuals do not hold absolute power: they themselves depend on a complex array of financial and other networks, such that power can more precisely be seen as held by corporate networks of metaprogrammers.

Castells' understanding of network power rests on the idea that every network is itself part of another network, such that networks-within-networks can be infinitely identified and power never concentrated in the hands of one particular group. Interactions between multimedia communication and financial markets constitute a crucial nexus of power in this framework: the programming of communication networks is beholden to financial calculations, and financial institutions in turn rely on information flows from communication networks in designing their respective programs. Although this "metanetwork" of global financial and multimedia corporations holds considerable power, it must also share power with political networks, cultural production networks, criminal networks and networks of scientific production.

Another compelling discussion of network power can be found in Alexander Galloway and Eugene Theacker's *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007). Calling attention to the fact that the language of networks has pervaded countless discourses of social life—from technology and philosophy to epidemiology, politics and military strategy—Galloway and Thacker question whether any "sense of an outside" still exists from which a critique of networks could be formulated (27). They contend that the scientific basis of network theory fashions networks as constituting "a kind of apolitical natural law," in the process obscuring relevant political power structures within the "black box of technology" (27). Whereas Grewal articulates his understanding of network power mechanisms through *standards*, Galloway and Thacker develop the concept of *protocols*, which although they are "rooted in the laws of nature" function as principles of political organization capable of shaping social relations (28). In addressing the unequal power structures governing networks, they counter the idea shared by Castells and others that globalization is an essentially neutral, benign reality.

It is perhaps easy to see the ways in which theories of network power dovetail with other attempts to understand globalization, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of *Empire* or Arjun Appadurai's notion of *global flows*. However, all these schemes—which seem to locate power within a diffuse and never-ending series of networks and subnetworks—beg the question: how can those disadvantaged by certain aspects of globalization (i.e., the global South) resist and contest programs that work against their interests? Castells' answer is that counterpower must be assembled through resistance networks that act upon the dominant networks themselves, in a twofold effort to change their programs and disrupt the switches that promote dominant interests; power and counterpower thus compete in the network society for influence over human minds.

The solutions proposed by Grewal, Galloway and Thacker are compatible with this general description of counterpower acting *through* pre-existing networks. Grewal (2008) sees the issue of network power primarily in terms of the standards that govern access; he thus contends that the only way to shift the distribution of power is to manipulate the "openness"

of networks, which he subdivides into the properties of *compatibility*, *availability*, and *malleability*. The *compatibility* of networks refers to the extent to which they can allow parallel standards of access to exist, such that compatible networks permit more than one standard of access, whereas incompatible networks do not. *Availability* describes the relative ease or difficulty with which a newcomer can enter the network, and *malleability* is the degree to which a standard can be deliberately revised or modified (173-178).

Applying these concepts to the case of the WTO network, a more *compatible* design would be one in which potential members are offered alternative sets of terms according to their specific realities, rather than the current system that requires all members to sign a uniform set of "agreements;" more broadly, global actors can "tilt the process [of globalization] in the direction of more freedom and less force" by developing the compatibility, availability and malleability of influential networks (Grewal 2003, 97).

In a similar fashion, Galloway and Thacker explore how resistance can be formulated around the *protocols* that govern networks. The fact that networks are affected by a combination of human and nonhuman actors (computer viruses, infectious diseases, natural disasters) implies that political action is exercised both deliberately and accidentally, allowing counterpower to target either side of the equation. In addition, Galloway and Thacker assert that political change in "protocological networks" is not implemented by transferring power from one locus to another, but rather by "exploiting power differentials already existent in the system" (81). Thus, *protocological resistance* involves "discovering holes in existent technologies and projecting potential change through those holes," as well as acting in a way that is spatially symmetrical to the diffuse, amorphous structure of power; following the model of the "swarm," for example (82). Like Castells and Grewal, Galloway and Thacker propose constructing counterpower without destroying existing networks. Effective resistance should take advantage of the opportunities and weaknesses inherent in a world of networks.

Network theory's close association with concepts such as the erosion of nation states (Hardt and Negri, 2001) and the emergence of a new *space of flows* (Castells 2010) has led to the frequent characterization of globalization as an essentially deterritorializing process. This logic of deterritorialization, however, has been hotly contested by geographers and other scholars who argue that globalization has not in fact escaped territoriality. Even some proponents of extra-territorial models—such as Jan Art Scholte (2008), who has argued for the existence of "supraterritorial phenomena"—are careful to emphasize that territory never loses all relevance: indeed, "every Internet user accesses cyberspace from a territorial location [...] so-called 'global cities' such as London and Tokyo still have longitude, latitude and altitude" (1493). Neil Brenner's (2011) theorization of space as a dynamic *process* in which "each moment of deterritorialization hinges upon an equally essential moment of *reterritorialization*" (106) firmly shifts emphasis back onto examining the reconfiguration—not erasure—of the territories through which global capital moves. Working from this dialectic of deterritorializatoin and reterritorializatoin, Stuart Elden (2005) further critiques deterritorializing theories by proposing that globalization be seen as a "reconfiguration of existing understandings [of space], rather than the radical break some suggest" (8). Elden specifically relates the logic of territory to networks, arguing that the network society "is the connection of points as much as the state system of modern Europe, and by extension the world, ever was" (16). While power may be distributed in networks that

cross official nation-state boundaries, members are still rooted in particular territories, and an important project for critical scholarship is the mapping of these new territorial arrangements.

Research into the intricate systems that determine how power, counterpower and territory operate in relation to networks is still in its early stages, and many questions remain as to the specific interplay of these factors in a globalized world. Further analysis of the North-South power dynamics that perpetuate themselves within and between networks could be elaborated by considering global South subjectivities alongside these new territorialities.

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About the Authors

Mathilda Shepard is a graduate student in Spanish at the University of Virginia. Her research interests center broadly on the dynamics of armed conflict and the history of warfare, especially modern and contemporary civil wars; cultures and economies of natural resource extraction; and human responses to natural disasters. Mathilda previously taught English in Barranquilla, Colombia, where she also worked with the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, an organization that assists ex-combatants in adjusting to civilian life. Prior to that, she worked at the International Rescue Committee in Charlottesville, VA and at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC.

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