

Reflections on the sources of power

A conversation between Michael Mann^{a*} and Mark Haugaard^b

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In this conversation Mann and Haugaard discuss Mann's four sources of power: military, political, economic and ideological power. It is argued that military and political power can have different sources, whereby political power is not reducible to coercion. The significance of ideological power is explored in relation to nationalism, 'false consciousness', the enlightenment, and the rise of religion in the twenty-first century. The exchange concludes with reflections upon the relationship between these sources of power to globalization and current environmental challenges.

Keywords: Political power; military power; economic power; ideological power; globalization

Mark Haugaard (MH): Michael, you have frequently been described as a contemporary classical social theorist. Part of that is simply honorific but, I think, in part it also describes the way in which you work: you are in dialogue with the founders of the sociological canon, with Marx, Weber and, to an extent, Durkheim. Would you like to comment upon how you would situate yourself relative to these founding thinkers?

Michael Mann (MM): Yes. My first degree was in history and I always enjoyed reading history, and what is striking about the classical sociological theorists is that they also read a lot of history and their empirical sources were substantially historical. Durkheim is a little bit different, of course. I got into the work that I am best known for – *The sources of social power* – essentially through having to teach. I did a specialized doctorate on factory relocations, which was essentially a combination of labour relations and community study, and then did more empirical research on the Peterborough labour market, working from the Department of Applied Economics in Cambridge. This was my first position, a research job, and then I moved to the University of Essex. There I had to teach both a course on the Enlightenment and the introduction to classical sociological theory. I'd already read a certain amount of Marx, and a little bit of Weber, but I had to suddenly read a lot more,

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keeping a couple of weeks ahead of my students. I developed a strong interest in the stratification theory of Marx and Weber and the first paper that I ever wrote on the subject (in 1972 and never published) was an attempt to relate together Weber's three dimensions of stratification and Marx as interpreted by Althusser and Poulantzas, which also contained three dimensions – the economic, the political and the ideological. I fairly quickly separated out the military from the political and there were my four sources of social power. The fact that I have always believed in empirically based theory, and that I have a very broad historical sweep, makes me fairly unusual within sociology, but both comparative and historical sociology were flourishing in the late 1950s and 1960s, especially in the US – the generation of scholars such as Lipset, Barrington Moore, Bendix and Juan Linz, so their work also had an influence on me. I'm not merely in the classical tradition, for there have been more modern exemplars.

MH: Sure.

MM: Though the discipline of sociology is an enormous one, there are relatively few macro or historical sociologists, yet their quality is very high – people like Randall Collins and Theda Skocpol – and there are younger scholars too, like Ed Amenta and my colleagues Rogers Brubaker and Andreas Wimmer at UCLA. We are well represented in the elite American universities. So there are plenty of others around. It's not a lonely furrow that I plough.

MH: A central element of your analysis is premised upon the idea of organization being based upon networks and organizations power. You have differentiated these networks into four broad sources of power and in so doing you have wanted to move away from any kind of monocausal reductionism, which strongly characterizes the Marxist tradition. However, I wonder is there a sense in which your perspective is still highly conflictually based? In other words, that at the basis of social order there is still conflict, which while being more sophisticated than the Marxist tradition, still retains the same conflictual reductionism, or would that be unfair?

MM: That is not fair. There are two faces of power: the collective and the distributive. Parsons had that distinction, although as Giddens noted, he focused overwhelmingly on collective power. It is implicit, of course, in both Marx and Weber as well. The notion is that society develops through both conflict and cooperation and that they are very closely entwined.

MH: You mention that you move from the trinity of three sources of power to the four, which was the division of the political and the military and, of course, you were criticized for that by Gianfranco Poggi and I think you answered those criticisms (in Mann 2005), but could you talk about why you decided to split the two apart?

MM: It was because I thought that there was a substantial difference between organized violence, which has the distinctive organizational form of hierarchy, comradeship, and a distinctive mode of extracting compliance, lethal violence: if you do not do this you will suffer severe bodily harm or death. I wanted to distinguish that from the kind of routinized deliberative assemblies, bureaucratic practices and legal codes which constitute the bases of states. Now it is true that empirically there is a substantial overlap in that some of the most powerful armed forces are generally wielded by states, but then there is also a range of non-state-like military organizations which have played substantial intermittent roles. One example is fascist parties. The Italian Fascist party was a paramilitary; there was no separate political party, while two great paramilitaries constituted a fundamental part of Nazism.

Much of the violent conflict in the world today is not wielded by the armies of state but by less regular formations, down to terrorist networks. Ethnic cleansing is obviously one place where this comes out strongly. States represent in a sense the institutionalization, the codification of power relations. New conflicts emerge and are processed, there is some conciliation of them and rules are set out and enforced by states. The threat of bodily harm is not all that significant in the legal systems in modern states. Though there is often overlap between military and political power, they should be analytically separated. Of course, there are overlaps between all four power sources and in communist regimes, a party-state elite controls all four. But a separation is analytically useful.

MH: One of the things that has always interested me about power is the consensual basis of power and that's what it seems to me you are pointing towards. But at the same time I also think that you want to resist theorizing this phenomenon, particularly in your accounts of ideological power. To me one of the interesting things about what I see as ideological power is the way in which, through influencing the *habitus* of a people, reification of structures and other process you can create consensus. Part of that relates to the way in which the state has taken control of socialization, which leads into the whole idea of the state shaping agents, forming the agency of people.

This constitutes a type of argument which you strongly resist. You resist it most obviously by avoiding any reference to Foucauldian accounts of governmentality, but even in your dealing with Weber, or lack of reference to someone like Norbert Elias, you avoid the idea that the modern authoritative state is also linked to the creation of a specific type of agent who consents to the authoritative structures of power. Yet, in moving beyond coercive power, towards ideological and political power as separate categories, it seems to me that you are implicitly pointing towards that kind of view. Is that a fair comment?

MM: I think that all this greatly exaggerates the role of states in human society. I don't think states are that important, if you like, as sources of ideology. States, of course, enforce laws and sometimes norms too but the source of them is not necessarily the state. Until the twentieth century states did not do very much at all.

MH: What about Ernest Gellner's point that one of the fundamental things about the formation of the modern state was not only its monopoly of taxation and violence but also monopoly of education, which constituted an attempt at monopoly of socialization by moving socialization out of the home into state institutions?

MM: Yes, education is a significant part of the growth of modern states, but I think it is very easy to have an overly-functional view of institutions and an oversocialized view of human beings. Education systems are full of battles over such issues as secular versus religious teaching, the history curriculum (as top-down, bottom-up, nationalist or internationalist) and technical versus broader instruction. Nor do most people comply because they agree with the official ideologies of ruling groups. People comply more because it is in the texture of their everyday life, but this does not give us a unified set of generalized norms or ideological messages by which we can live our lives. It is not usually the case that we have an unproblematic identity with the nation, for example, or with democracy or with whatever other abstract idea.

MH: When you write about ideology in *The sources of power* you argue that it has many manifestations. There is the first level, the systemic level, which includes the meanings that we internalize; the norms and rituals. However, if you think about

meanings, these meanings themselves have a certain trajectory within them. For instance, within modern education, sport is given a huge significance. Surely, part of the ideological function of sport has to be to create a competitive agent and, in so doing, internalizing in the *habitus* of subjects the idea that competition constitutes an intrinsic part of human nature, which is part of legitimating capitalism.

MM: I think that is absurd. I think that overstates the role of capitalism in modern society. Not everything is functional to capitalism. It is not necessarily that it is dysfunctional, just that it is not much to do with it – Robert Merton called this ‘eufunctional’. One can of course analyze the way in which corporate capitalism has increasingly invaded professional sports, but in no sense did capitalism create any significant sport. Football teams wear shirts displaying advertising logos and the football ground is dominated by advertising slogans so there is quite a close relationship between sports attracting large crowds (live or on television) and consumer capitalism. But competition between individuals and teams is much older than capitalism. Our Olympic games originates from the Greeks’ Olympic games. Almost all societies have their forms of competition in which males, and sometimes females, show their prowess, so it’s not particularly related to capitalism.

MH: What about banal nationalism, for instance? Fairly everyday nationalism which is subtle in its workings.

MM: Yes, I think that banal nationalism really does exist, but at the same time people have multiple sources of identity. There are sentiments connected with all of them. They sometimes tell us contradictory things, so that the actual realm of ideology is itself contested. Religion, nationalism, gender, class; these all compete and have meaning systems attached to them whose salience to human beings is very variable and can be evoked in different situational contexts. Americans had no conceptions of Saddam Hussein, no conceptions of Iraq or where it was in the world until their leaders declared that we were threatened by them. Then the threat could be evoked for a short period of time, but when we failed to defeat the Iraqi insurgents fairly quickly this evocation turned sour. In fact, I am not even sure that ‘nationalism’ is always the right word for this kind of evocation. I was struck in delving into the research on the beginnings of World War I that any mass identity with the nation was being mediated by people’s routine obedience to authority figures. If in a French village in 1914 the priest, the mayor and the school teacher all urged the young men to enlist, they did so. Indeed, they went cheering to the front – though they were not cheering for long. Today, if the president and the leader of the opposition party both tell Americans that X is our enemy, and the mass media do not dispute this, most American are inclined to believe them. Ideological sentiments directed against a person or nation might not be as deep-rooted as one might think.

MH: Is there a danger that your concept of human nature is relatively constant through the ages? I am thinking, for instance, of your account of the role of religion where you say – and I think it is a convincing argument – that the foundations of capitalism and industrial society were laid in these common shared sense of norms. Yet, you resist, for instance, the idea that the Protestant ethic idea was central to the emergence of capitalism or that there was a new kind of social agent created by Protestantism?

MM: I don’t reject this altogether, but I do add to Max Weber’s approach to this that the rise of Protestantism was also related to political and geopolitical power relations. The princes in north western Europe, with their economic power growing,

sensed they had the power to contest the domination by southern European Catholic powers. The Elector of Saxony welcomed Martin Luther and protected him. So there is something in Weber’s idea of a relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, but this was not the only source of power involved.

You first asked me about everyday ideology but the most powerful role for ideology in my work is in the creation of new meaning systems capable of giving a plausible interpretation of some contemporary crisis which existing ideologies appear to struggle with or cannot cope with. This is the most powerful role where ideological power becomes tremendously important in changing the paths of social development.

MH: You must have a theory of how ideologies do this? What are the techniques of success? Is there a formula for success for an ideology to organizationally outflank another ideology in a moment of crisis?

MM: Number one, it needs the existing ideologies to appear to be defeated and it has to offer an alternative and plausible interpretation, so it has to make sense to people even though there can be no scientific basis of truth of it. It may be false. Much of fascism was false but it appeared plausible in the light of World War I, which gave a core group of veterans the belief that you could solve social problems by a more disciplined yet comradely use of violence to knock heads together and produce social order where capitalism and democracy seemed to be bringing disorder. This was plausible yet the ideological competition between fascism, social democracy, Christian democracy, liberalism, conservatism and milder forms of authoritarianism was a close-run thing. Fascists only won in a few countries. It’s a combination of the failure of the existing ideologies and an alternative which seems appropriate to the times and which uses elements of the present social structure yet emphasizes them in a new way, which makes converts.

MH: In your work on the last part of the third volume, which today’s paper was based around [Tampere, Power and Knowledge Conference, 2010], you argued that neoliberalism has created its own failures. Yet, neoliberalism offers itself as a solution to its own failures which is, of course, really a brilliant performative act to be able carry off. Surprisingly they seem to be having some success. Maybe you would like to comment upon the techniques which are used?

MM: In this case they have had a considerable amount of economic power. That has lain principally in a greatly-expanding financial sector, able over a 30-year period to become less and less regulated. This was led by the two Anglophone countries, the US and Britain, which had the biggest financial sectors and which had held the reserve currency of the world over the twentieth century. These economic powers were then buttressed by the greater resonance of neoliberalism in the liberal cultures of the Anglophone countries. This was ideological power. Finally the Thatcher and Reagan administrations pioneered a new political strategy which broke apart the traditional working- and lower-middle support for welfare and progressive taxation. The Anglos deregulated first, gradually forcing other countries to follow them (sometimes by local banking sectors arguing that Anglophone bank freedoms were giving them distinct market advantages). The cutting-edge of its economic powers was its ability to destabilize currencies. The United States is distinctly protected from this today by virtue of holding the reserve currency, the dollar. That restrains speculation against the dollar. It is European countries that are suffering more from the sovereign debt crisis.

We could respond to the Great Recession with alternative policies, like Keynesian pump-priming; or the reverse, cutting government expenditure (and perhaps raising taxes). There are technical arguments among economists, but in democracies the more important arguments concern popular ideologies, like all sticking together versus tightening our belts. The latter has an edge because people understand it directly in relation to their own household debt. You don't spend your way out of an economic crisis as a household or as an individual. So it has a certain common sense power, though it does resonate differently in different environments. It is difficult for it to resonate much in France, for example, where cutting back public expenditure would appear to affect everybody because the middle class benefits just as much if not more from welfare benefits, the low age of retirement, etc. So politicians in France make noises about cuts, but find it difficult to implement them for their own supporters even if they are conservatives. In Britain, however, the mass of the population can more easily conceive of the 'unworthy poor' receiving welfare benefits. The local plausibility structure is important. It doesn't come out of nowhere – it builds on existing ideological sentiments to convince people.

MH: Somewhere in the discussion of ideology you argue against the concept of anything like 'false consciousness' because you say it is unlikely that you can convince people of something that is false for a long period of time, which I think is right, but is that entirely correct in the sense that you can, for instance, reify the markets, or appeal to the image of the 'householder' even though it is not appropriate. Strategies like this work relative to the *habitus* of the public. Therefore it is possible to perpetuate something which you can show to be demonstrably false. I share your dislike of the term 'false consciousness' because it has that patronizing elitist aspect but, at the same time, there is some way in which ideology through reification, and through appeals to *habitus*, can obscure reality and obscure relations of domination and then people accept this – it is possible to make the followers follow in situations in which they shouldn't.

MM: Yes. I don't completely reject the notion of false consciousness because in terms of, say, the outbreak of World War I where you had a brief period of mass enthusiasm for war and all countries believed the soldiers would be back by Christmas having achieved victory – that was obviously false and so that is an example of false consciousness. But in most places where it is used things are much more complex. Take, for example, the present day United States where a lot of quite poor ordinary people vote for the Republicans and vote for policies which probably harm their own material interests. There are various ways of explaining that, all of which turn out to have some validity. One is that they don't value their material interests as much as they value morality, racism, national defence, defence against crime, and defence against terrorism – and believe these are reasons for voting Republican. A second explanation is that the poor vote less, with an increasing component of this coming from illegal immigrants or green card holders who cannot legally vote. A third is that they are concentrated in rural areas where the sources of information are structurally biased toward Republicanism. A fourth is that voters' fields of vision are limited. They compare themselves to those around them not to the rich (and so are not conscious and/or bothered by widening inequality); and they approved Bush the Younger's tax cuts because of the 10 per cent cut they received, rather than the 25 per cent cut received by the rich. The fifth is that their representatives in Congress listen less to what they say than to what big business says, for that is the source of politicians' campaign funds, and business is Republican. The

sixth is that their interest in politics is very low and if they vote, they vote the way they have always voted. Some of this, but only some, involves things we might be tempted to call false consciousness, but the whole political debate is in any case about simple sound-bites usually delivered inside paid commercials emphasizing the incompetence, inconsistency or borderline criminality of the opponent. Truth and falsity are not quite the right terms for describing the struggle.

MH: In Volume III you are dealing with what have been the significant changes and one of the concepts which you use in previous volumes is the idea of *caging* and, of course, humans were caged when they moved out of hunter-gatherer to alluvial agricultural societies and then in the move from feudal society to modernity they were caged by the state. In the move towards globalization people talk of the surpassing of the state but the state is very much part of reinforcing globalization. I was wondering what you think of Zygmunt Bauman's idea that globalization actually means continued caging for the 'losers' in globalization but a freeing up of the cage for the elite – the elite move around, they move their capital to wherever they want to; set up industries and then they leave for cheaper labour somewhere else. However, this is actually dependent upon the masses remaining caged, staying where they are.

MM: Yes, there is something in that. The core of it is that capital is more mobile than labour. But one can overdo the contrast. There is now considerable labour migration, and the caging metaphor which I use has the downside that we cannot imagine a partial cage. We are not totally caged by the nation-state and we never have been.

MH: But isn't caging scalar? Of course you are not absolutely caged but you could be more, or less, caged?

MM: Yes, that is what I meant. Clearly nation-states have more salience today than they did two hundred years ago, so there has been a process of caging, yes. Globalization is often assumed to be only the globalization of capitalism, which is supposedly undermining the nation-state. But this is quite wrong. There are three main elements in globalization – of capitalism, of the nation-state and of empire, the single American Empire. All empires except for one have collapsed and the world is run by 192 nation-states, states which claim sovereignty over a given territorial area in the name of the people. Actually, the nation-state is the global ideal, rather than global reality. All 192 claim to be nation-states but many states have very few powers, don't have much infrastructural power, and lack genuine sovereignty. Their caging is limited. But they would all like to be nation-states. They believe that nation-states are more effective, and so they strive toward it.

But there hasn't been an undermining of the nation-state. When were they supposed to be more dominant? Before the 1940s, when they did very little in the way of welfare rights or political economy, beyond tariffs to support themselves? Before the 1950s, when empires, not nation-states, dominated the world? One would have to date the heyday of nation-states only from the 1960s. But what has happened since then? There has been a neoliberal challenge, successful in some respects, but leaving the proportion of GDP absorbed by government expenditures exactly the same even today. The major change in many states has been a continuing shift from military to civilian functions. In the north of the world the backbone of the state is no longer provided by military power except for the United States, and to a lesser extent for Britain and France. That is a significant change. In any case, the ability to transcend the nation-state has long existed for the rich. It certainly existed in the

first half of the twentieth century, especially in the form of capital movements to which national political economy showed great deference. Only in the post-World War II period, under the Bretton Woods system was there a degree of capital 'repression' which has recently been largely abolished. In this respect we are back to the pre-Great Depression era. But there are now other groups who are less, caged – like ourselves.

MH: That's what I was just thinking – doing this interview in Tampere!

MM: That's right. Various professional groups, led by we academics who probably constitute the most transnational profession of all. But the movement also includes in a different kind of way migrant workers

MH: But they move from one cage to the next, I think?

MM: Yes, but the other one is not their cage. . .

MH: Exactly – they want to get into somebody else's cage.

MM: That's right.

MH: In your answer you mentioned that in the west, military power – coercive power – is less significant for sovereign states internally. Part of your theory is that all these four sources of power work together, but that some of them are dominant in specific periods. Maybe you'd like to comment on that?

I also want to ask a supplemental question to do with the present in your work, as follows: there is a suggestion that ideological power is in some ways in decline, with the exception of fascism in the more contemporary period, but how do we make sense of the sudden rise of ideological power in terms of religious fundamentalism both in the United States and the Islamic world?

MM: In Volume II I made an incautious generalization about the decline of religious ideology. I think that would be true for the area of the world that I was in reality describing at that point, which was western Europe. It remains true for the indigenous population of western Europe. It is also true in a sense for the former state socialist countries, which after the collapse of state socialism as a mobilizing ideology have not seen much of a religious revival. But clearly the United States, and the Muslim and Hindu worlds are very different, while both Latin America and Africa are seeing conversions by newer types of religion. The United States has had a series of religious awakenings of which the recent one is only the latest one. It is the first one to penetrate deeply into federal level politics, though state-level politics have often been affected by such movements. In the Middle East there was a phase when Arab socialism and secular military regimes tried to modernize, but failed in the Middle East to deliver the goods. This was followed by a resurgence of political Islam claiming to be able to solve social problems. It has already faltered in the main country in which it seized power, Iran. But now it is being kept alive by American imperialism. Iran shows that if you involve religion too much with the state and the state is not particularly successful that weakens both the state and the religion. Iranians undoubtedly now want to go through a more secular phase, so I don't think that this is a long-term major shift, but where religion still forms the basis of social life as is clearly the case in Muslim societies and parts of the United States, further political mobilization of religion remains possible.

When one deals with the twentieth century one has to appreciate the role of ideology, because there have been a number of highly mobilized ideologies. It has been a very ideological century so what has happened in the last few years is not in a sense new.

MH: Implicit in your argument is a sort of alternative to the somewhat self-congratulatory Enlightenment secularization hypothesis, religion – Christianity – did not decline because of increased rationality, but rather because of competition from other ideologies, is that correct? Is that a fair reading of your argument? MM: I think in Europe it mainly declined because the state became contested through explicitly secular forces, emanating from socialist but especially from liberal elements emerging out of the working and middle classes, among whom intellectuals were prominent. So it is not surprising that the religious monopoly over education was especially contested. At the same time, the churches became weighed down by the past and by the support of politically reactionary but declining social groups. So the weakening was only partly due to the rise of more secular ideologies like socialism and fascism and partly due to the rise of a more secular society in general. I am not sure that you could describe either side in this conflict as being more 'rationalistic', though the secular side did see it in these terms. Yet socialism and fascism were meaning systems which also surpassed certain knowledge and personal experience just as religion did.

MH: That leads us on to your account of political sources of power which is, of course, very strongly linked to the idea of the emergence of the modern state and, in a way, the modern state for you is the source of various social movements. In modernity, various elites can compete for power through the creation or mobilization of social movements which then try to control state power. Is there now a change in the sense that social movements are now moving beyond the state into the global arena? If we are to make sense of the concept of *globalization* maybe it constitutes the claim that there has been a movement of the realm of politics. The emergence of the sovereign state created the impetus for social movements, and social movements started fighting it out for state power. However, with globalization these social movements are now transcending the state by becoming global – would that be a fair comment?

MM: Social movements have been transnational for some time now. Socialism was in principle transnational as were fascism and modern liberalism, but to implement their goals they had to do this through nation-states which caged them. Some contemporary social movements deploy what has been called a 'boomerang effect' where transnational social movements recognize that in order to effect change they have to come back to the level of the state to change its legislation. They can go a certain way through international institutions like the United Nations, but they essentially need to go back to the state, so there's a double effect there, just as there was in socialism. Socialism got itself unintentionally caged. It was the struggle against capitalism wherever that was, but in order to achieve the most elementary reforms like more safety for workers, they had to come back to the state and there they got caged. This is also true to a lesser extent with environmental movements because on this issue there is an explicit recognition that this is a global problem and that the environment everywhere is affected by social activity everywhere and so by global trends as a whole. Thus there is clearly developing a more prolonged life for transnational organizations, but alongside international geopolitics, for there has been a growth of soft geopolitics, a growth of intergovernmental negotiations in general in the post-World War II period. This creates an intergovernmental realm where these transnational organizations can lobby. They are at all of the environmental conferences which are strictly conferences of state representatives. Yet the

environmental groups are there and are admitted not to the inner sanctums, but to the outer reaches of decision-making. So, yes, there is more transnationalism.

MH: One of the things which informs your model is the image of actors using various organizing networks of power but the overall effect is an unintended one, which constitutes the logic of history. What is frightening about the environmental problem is that, in a way, it calls for a reversal of that whole process.

MM: That's right. It is very different to previous crises. Firstly, it is predictable fifty years in advance, whereas all the other major crises came relatively suddenly and unexpectedly. Secondly, the crisis itself is caused by the major achievements of the modern period – there's an evolutionary story which is often told of the growth of capitalist prosperity, the growth of the nation-state and the steady extension of democratic citizenship, including T. H. Marshall's notion of 'social citizenship'. But the environmental crisis has been firstly caused by the search for capitalist growth and profit; secondly by the nation-state's commitment to growth which means that all politicians have measured themselves in terms of GNP growth, unemployment and so on when they are in power; and thirdly, by consumer democracy, which means that we measure our success, and that of capitalism and the nation-state by our level of consumption. The three great achievements of modern western civilization – capitalism, the nation-state and consumer democracy – must be challenged head-on. It is a very tall order.

MH: It also means taking control of social order. This is, of course the utopian vision: if you think of Marx's vision of capitalism as this unorganized thing which goes into crisis. According to Marx, the way we get out of crisis is by taking control of the economy. The environmental crisis entails taking control in a very different way than Marx ever predicted. Yet, it has that same utopian quality which makes me slightly depressed about the prospects of the environmental crisis ever being resolved.

MM: Absolutely. Given the scale of the reductions in emissions that will have to be made, that will involve regulating highly the ability of capitalist enterprises to make profit, the ability of states to generate economic growth, and the ability of ourselves to consume, I don't think it is going to happen or at least not before we get the first real environmental crisis. Even then, those crises will be highly unevenly distributed. Some very poor countries will take the first brunt of it. It is possible to envisage a disaster scenario where the rich countries protect themselves and the poor countries die.

MH: And the caged stay in their cage.

MM: And even erect a fortress around it.

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Sex scandals, racial domination and the systemic correlation of power-modalities in Foucault

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This essay explores relations between discourses of sexuality and race in US society today through an analysis of recent sex scandals, in a manner informed by Foucault and provoking further critical development of his theory. Sex scandal narratives demonstrate how sovereignty, discipline, and biopolitics currently combine to form a systemic correlation of power-technologies. This power matrix, in turn, enables strategies of racial domination through the war on terror, immigration control, and economic crisis management. Sex scandals both help bring these racial power-dynamics into view and reproduce them by fortifying the concatenation of power-modalities on which they rely.

Keywords: sex scandals; sexuality; race; biopolitics; Foucault

Sex scandals in a time of crisis

Mid-way through George W. Bush's presidency it seemed that historic developments in American politics finally had rendered sex scandals obsolete as prominent features of public discourse. After the revelations of torture at Guantánamo, private contractors plundering Iraq, and federal indifference to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, American political culture appeared to have moved on to scandals of a far more shocking and enveloping nature. In such times, with officials' miscarriage of their public duties of such epic proportions, who really cared anymore about Monica's blue dress? Had not far more ominous configurations of power, and more profoundly troubling violations of the public trust, come into view?

Apparently they had not, as the spectacular humiliations of Eliot Spitzer and then John Edwards in 2008, followed by Tiger Woods and others over the next two years, vividly demonstrated. Whatever the current political-cultural formation is, sex scandals are still very much a part of it. This offers an intriguing puzzle for analysis, especially now that yet another outpouring of scandalous – though not sexual – disclosures has occurred regarding lending companies' flouting of their fiduciary duties in the recent financial meltdown. To solve the conundrum of this sex scandal culture that, zombie-like, will not die even as apparently more monumental conflicts rage, we need a nuanced account both of sex scandals themselves and of the relations of power that pervade American society today. Stock explanations that reduce

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