Is It All About Networking?

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Review of Niall Ferguson, “The Square and the Tower, Networks and Power, From the Freemasons to Facebook” (Penguin, 2018)

These days, everyone seems to meet online. People looking for dating partners now rely on specialized websites, along with people looking for explanations of arcane questions, people looking for angry confirmation of their own darkest suspicions—and people seeking advice about how to make a bomb and why they should set it off. Doesn’t our world now turn on cyber connections of one sort or another?

That’s the premise of Niall Ferguson’s new book, but with this twist: If you look across history, he argues, you see that social networks were often quite important and have often proved decisive when “hierarchical authority structures” began to totter. To prove it, he takes readers through great moments in history, with a survey that covers fifty episodes (each with its own chapter) in 350 pages. So we get Portuguese sea dogs exploring new routes to the east and establishing new trade networks, Enlightenment philosophes encouraging or chiding each other, aristocratic or royal networks in the background of 19th century diplomacy, down to Hitler’s circle, and Stalin’s and Henry Kissinger’s, and so on.

Many episodes call to mind famous settings as well as famous figures. You can almost see Ferguson narrating his tales while standing in front of the docks in Lisbon or the Palace of Versailles or Moscow’s Kremlin or Beijing’s Forbidden City. And probably you will be able to see this someday, as Ferguson has already turned a number of previous books into multi-part television specials. It will surely be enjoyable to watch. That might be enough justification to make it—as it is almost enough justification to read this fast-paced, entertaining book. But the book version left me with a lot of doubts.

It’s not until the end of the book—in the “Afterward”—that Ferguson explains the enigmatic title. In Sienna, the tower of the Palazzo Pubblico, the seat of governing authority, looms over the square in which merchants, citizens, friars engage in “all kinds of more or less informal human interaction.” There is a famous set of 14th century frescoes in the Palazzo by Ambrogio Lorenzetti which are supposed to illustrate “good and bad government.” Ferguson tells us he bought reproductions as "an impecunious graduate student" and has "faithfully hung them" on his study walls "at Oxford, Harvard and Stanford." Now he sees that they offer “startling evidence that the dichotomy between network and hierarchy is an ancient idea.” I haven’t lived with those frescoes, but when I studied the reproductions available online, that theme didn’t jump out at me.
And that’s one of the main problems with Ferguson’s vision of “networks” as drivers of history. If you focus on “the dichotomy” between “hierarchy” and “network,” the latter encompasses an awful lot of activity—like that “square” in Sienna. Every merchant has suppliers and customers. Normally, we call that a “market” rather than a “network.” Lots of people in medieval Italian towns were aroused by itinerant preachers or orators, as Americans today get stirred up by talk radio or cable TV programs. Normally we call recipients of such incitement an “audience” rather than a “network.” People who belong to the same church or a church of the same kind (or synagogue or mosque) may feel more comfortable or trusting with others who share that affiliation. Normally, we call that a “congregation” or “religious community” rather than a “network.” There are a whole lot of things in social life that are not “hierarchy.” Lumping them all together as “networks” does not clarify how they work.

Some of the difficulty goes to an inherent ambiguity in current usage. The word “network” may refer to something physical, like a railroad or highway network. Or it may refer to something which is at least fixed by contract or property rights, like a radio or television network. The internet, as a network of networks, is more amorphous (because it is so dense with potential pathways), but you can’t send or receive information on it unless you are connected to a definite, uniquely numbered Internet Service Provider, which remembers the coded “address” of every subscriber.

By contrast, human interactions don’t even require that minimal level of “protocol,” so it’s very hard to say which “connections” should count in a human “network.” In today’s America, we go to first names after one meeting or one exchange of emails. Does that make us “friends” or associates? How about telemarketers, who call you by first name from the opening of the first call? Even of those we designate as “friends” on Facebook, how many could you ask to lend you money or take risks on your behalf? The appeal of the “network” for Ferguson—that it is independent of formal, official, legal or hierarchical controls—is also what makes it so maddeningly difficult to pin down.

What we’d most like to know is how and how much networks matter. Here’s where the amorphous quality of the concept most disables analysis. Even if we see a circle of people engaged in a common effort, we don’t know whether to focus on the circle or the effort. A criminal mastermind may recruit a bunch of crime specialists—a getaway car driver, a gunman, a safe-cracker, and others. Presumably this grouping is not the cause of the bank robbery but the result of the mastermind’s determination to rob banks. Or would he not have thought to rob banks if not already familiar with criminals who had relevant skills?

Ferguson does not pause to ponder whether human networks arose because of common purpose or somehow prompted already connected people to work toward a common end. By the time he gets to interactions among top officials of the Nixon administration, all such questions are completely supplanted by technical methodology. Ferguson offers a series of computer-generated charts and diagrams, based on frequency of mention of particular names in the indexes of published memoirs. Maybe that tells you some people figured in a lot of important transactions. Or maybe they were just memorable to memoirists because of their amusing or annoying personal traits. Pat Nixon figures large among memoirists (as one of Ferguson’s charts indicates). That probably does not tell us much about either President Nixon’s foreign policy or his domestic policy.

Mentions are not always meaningful. If we had every note penned by Thomas Jefferson, we would probably find that wine dealers were mentioned more often than any philosopher. Other researchers have found that scholars are particularly
likely to cite published works if they themselves are cited in those works. We might call that a “network,” but does it reflect much more than the vanity of authors? What’s not a conspiracy (or a joint effort) may be a more or less random result of more or less random interactions.

It would be impressive if Ferguson could show that in episodes A, B and C, challengers failed because they did not have adequate networks of supporters while the result was much different in E, F and G, where there were such networks. But this would be very hard to show, because it’s so unclear what we would be counting. Ferguson’s method, at any rate, is not to study contrasts but to invoke supposed parallels.

In what is, in effect, the climax of the book, we read that “the global impact of the Internet has few analogies in history better than the impact of printing on sixteenth-century Europe.” Maybe. But the comparison is not helpful in explaining outcomes. Did Protestantism take root in Northern Europe because there was more printing there than in France, Italy, Hungary, Poland (all agitated, at one time, by influential communities of Reformers)? Why did Protestantism stop spreading in Europe after the 16th century? Surely not because printing was no longer important. On the other hand, how did Christianity become so widely diffused through the Roman Empire before there was any printing?

Have computer networks upended established powers in our times? There is, Ferguson tells us, “a compelling case to be made that, without harnessing social networks through online platforms, Donald Trump could never have become president of the United States.” What he documents is that Trump got more followers than Clinton on both Twitter and Facebook. But Trump also got more attention from journalists and TV news reporters, even before he won the Republican nomination and for reasons that would have operated even had there been no internet. Trump was a startling novelty in politics and a brilliant showman, while Clinton had been around forever and was quite content to be boring. So “online platforms” may have added little to general currents of opinion, unless you’re determined to see “networks” as the answer to every historical question.

So with jihadi networks. Ferguson makes the point that “self-radicalized” terrorists have usually, in fact, been coaxed to terror by interactions with actual human networks, not just by online videos. He doesn’t dig into the question whether cyber networks add more reach to government surveillance than to jihadi recruitment.

It’s unfair to compare Ferguson’s latest offering with dreary works of academic agit-prop, hammering on “capitalist exploitation” or “racism” or “patriarchy” as the cause of every misfortune in history. Ferguson is a graceful and quite engaging writer. But this book does seem to be riding one hobby-horse, as if you could tour the world on a toy with wooden wheels.

As an accomplished historian, Niall Ferguson should have been more engaged by variations. References in the book suggest his time at Stanford stimulated his interest in the work of nearby tech titans in Silicon Valley. Or did he go out there because he was already so intrigued by the possibilities and dangers of online networking?

Maybe it is the temptation of our time. If you are absorbed by social media, “network” is an irresistible metaphor. Vast numbers of minor celebrities (and legitimately famous people, too) obsess about how many eyeballs “follow” them online. Millions more obsessively “post” the smallest episodes in their own lives. One of Ferguson’s favorite metaphors is that networks are “horizontal” (in the sense that they do not require a hierarchy). Maybe we are so engrossed by “horizontal” connections, we forget to look up.

A character in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, The First Circle, says that “a great writer is like
a second government. That’s why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones.” In Soviet times, Solzhenitsyn did rely on a network of assistants to copy, hide and arrange for clandestine circulation of his works. Surely, that network was not the central explanation for Solzhenitsyn’s role in bringing down Soviet power and discrediting communism. *The Square and the Tower* does not make enough allowance for forces in human affairs outside the control of either governments or networks.

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