

Joined-up politics: how social networks have shaped events

In 'The Square and the Tower', Niall Ferguson proposes an alternative to top-down history



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Tim Harford OCTOBER 11 2017



“The world remains a world of squares and towers,” concludes Niall Ferguson, after skipping across 500 years in about as many pages. The square — the town square, the market square — represents social networks, “the structures that human beings naturally form”. The tower represents hierarchical control and secular authority, the top-down approach to social structure.

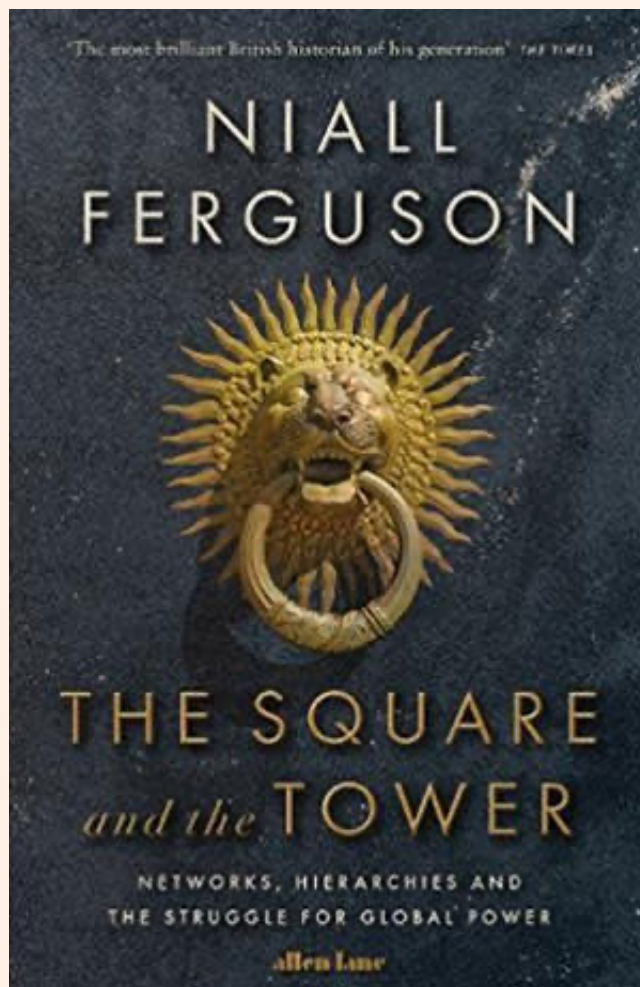
The study of how networks compete or co-operate with each other and with hierarchies is a hot topic in the social sciences, and it is easy to see why: think of the US military versus Isis; or Russian intelligence trying to exploit the US media; or Facebook and, well, almost anything.

Yet both networks and hierarchies have been around for a long time, as Ferguson is quick to remind us in *The Square and the Tower*. Networks flourished in the years 1450 to 1790, he writes; hierarchies reasserted themselves until around 1970, and networks have been making a comeback ever since. The book is a history told with the focus on the way networks and hierarchies shaped events.

This approach is engaging but not always helpful. It is unclear that we gain much by describing Pizarro's conquistadors and their allies as a network opposing Atahualpa's hierarchical Inca society.

When it does work, however, it works well. German National Socialism is described as a network that then transformed itself into a crushingly powerful hierarchy. Faced with the power of the German state, the network of Jewish business interests that had loomed so large in the Nazi imagination proved helpless. "After all that had been written about the web of Jewish power," he writes, "the only networks that really mattered were the ones that enabled emigration, and those were often simple family ties." The analysis is illuminating, chilling and still relevant today.

While National Socialism was a network that infected a hierarchy, the Soviet infiltration of the British old boys' club between the 1930s and the 1960s shows that hierarchies can infect networks, too.



No book written by a historian of Ferguson's gifts is likely to disappoint, but *The Square and the Tower* does have one obvious weakness: it's not at all clear that the author takes his own premise seriously. That premise, set out in the first 50 pages of the book, is that by adding the formal social science of networks to the informal descriptive practice of history, we can unlock new insights.

This union of history and social science is an exciting prospect with Ferguson in charge. But the early chapters in which he outlines the science and social science of networks are dutiful literature reviews; though he nods to network scholars such as Ronald Burt, Mark Granovetter and Duncan Watts, those names do not resurface later in the book. Ferguson cites an impressive range of social science research papers; he does not always trouble to explain technical terms as a skilled science writer might. One is left with the impression that he is happy to list every tool in the toolkit but doesn't actually want to pick up a spanner himself.

The impression is reinforced by the way the author uses diagrams. Network diagrams always look good, whether it's diagram 22, showing the interconnected nodes of the Bloomsbury Group ("it was . . . sexual relationships that defined the network", we are told) or, over the page, diagram 23 depicting the evolving connections between the great powers in the late 19th century. These diagrams have been reproduced from other sources, but without sufficient labelling. Those lines mean something yet we can only guess what, unless we consult the original sources directly. The network diagrams, like the network research described early on in the book, appear to be largely decorative. That is a missed opportunity.

Yet that same flip of the page takes us from Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes to a theory of the causes of the first world war outlined by none other than Henry Kissinger. There's a joy in such leaps — from industrial networks in pre-Victorian Britain to the Taiping Rebellion, from Kissinger's use of networked influence to how the World Economic Forum reshaped Nelson Mandela's policy of nationalisation.

"By choice, I am more of a networks guy", Ferguson tells us early on, and he is convincing in his claim that networks have been playing an important role for centuries. Yet at the end of his freewheeling history, he yearns for someone to take charge: "The lesson of history is that trusting in networks to run the world is a recipe for anarchy." At best, the Illuminati take control; more likely, the Jacobins.

[The Square and the Tower: Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power](#), by Niall Ferguson, *Allen Lane*,
RRP£25/Penguin Press, RRP\$30, 608 pages

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