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# Book Review: *New Power: a review essay*

Book Review

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New Power: How Power Works in Our Hyperconnected World- and  
How to Make It Work for You

by *Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms*

DOUBLEDAY, Penguin Random House LLC

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*New Power—How power works in our hyperconnected work and how to make it work for you*, by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, is partly a manual of practical procedures and partly a theorizing work. It assumes that an ongoing process of in-depth change regarding the nature of power is taking place today, and that it is possible for each and every one to somehow take advantage of the trend, by riding it through the adoption of certain techniques.

The adoption of these techniques is the aspect of the book which makes it particularly prone to editorial success, but it is not the feature that I will dedicate the most attention to in this critical review. According to Heimans and Timms we are allegedly witnessing a series of changes that are characterized generically by the decline of the importance of the so-called “Old Power” – roughly corresponding to formal institutions and organizations, hierarchy, secrecy and a neat separation of public and private spheres of existence – which is allegedly being replaced by a “New Power”, flourishing under the shape of peer-to-peer coordination, informality, network social provision, publicity qua transparency and the dissolution of boundaries between public and private spheres of existence. Whereas Old Power would systematically stimulate competition and be induced by it, New Power feeds on cooperation, which it promotes in return. If the right analogy for Old Power is the idea of stock, then the perfect match for New Power is the notion of flow. Whereas the former normally operates through a logic of downloads, the inherent tendency of the latter are uploads. Instead of passive consumption, New Power represents an active attitude, and one coordinated with others, flourishing in a cultural environment that consistently foments an inclination to the “do-it-ourselves”. In contrast to the prevalence of expertise, professionalism, organizational loyalty and long-term affiliation—all of which typical Old Power traits—we now witness a move toward open-sourcing and radical transparency, in addition to cooperation and self-organization. In general, the inclination is toward not a consumer culture, but instead a



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maker culture, albeit one which is merely amateurish and predominantly associated with short term prospects of participation.

In a moment of alarm and judgment-suspension, paying homage to the formally “value-free” academic attitude and supposedly positive-only character of analysis, Heimans and Timms take pains to also clarify that “Old” does not necessarily mean bad, nor does “New” imply that the emerging facts are intrinsically good. However, the very categorization and the choice of the designations “Old” and “New” notably induce a leaning for the celebration (emphatic in various passages of the book) of the aspects presented as novelty. Whether out of a genuine enthusiasm for what is indicated as being emergent, or merely as a result of an attitude of metamorphosing necessity into virtue, the truth is that for Heimans and Timms the issue is clearly about learning how to “ride the tiger” of the trend of a supposedly unstoppable change.

And yet there are several reasons for skepticism about this simplified presentation, some of which are provided by the authors of the book themselves. In various cases they occasionally acknowledge it and it would really be much more appropriate to know how to combine the “Old” and “New” power in the right proportions. For according to Heimans and Timms, there are four ideal-typical social configurations which represent combinations of Old Power and New Power, or what they call the “New Power Compass”: “Castles”, “Cheerleaders”, “Connectors” and “Crowds”. Castles, it is clarified, predominantly use Old Power and also profess Old Power values; Cheerleaders defend New Power values, but instead use Old Power models; Connectors adopt New Power practices while still professing Old Power values; and finally, only Crowds are really driven by an organizational dynamic that is characteristically peer-driven and enhancer of New Power, openly and consciously proclaiming the support to the corresponding cluster of values. That said, Heimans and Timms admit that it is a matter of context to establish which organizational formula is the most viable, or most effective, taking wise care to distance themselves from a “one-size-fits-all” attitude of unequivocal and unconditional New Power worship.

The notion of power invoked by Heimans and Timms, taken from Bertrand Russell’s formulation, “the ability to get things done”, is formally neutral from the point of view of social hierarchies. It thus arguably indicates a *forma mentis* more unequivocally valid if applied to a scientific-technical universe, rather than to sociological analysis: the ability to build a bridge or a tunnel, or to effectively cure a disease, for example; and in a clear-cut opposition to the ability to lead crowds, or to sell products or to manufacture political consent. Of course, power in the Russellian sense also tends to produce socio-economic or political ramifications; but it is not *per se* immediately a social category. And regarding that aspect it lies in opposition to power (*Macht*) in Max Weber’s sense, defined as an agent’s ability to impose his/her will on others, even though it is against their own will. In this way, Weberian power is therefore unavoidably a “zero-sum” reality, whereby what is held or exercised by some is also inevitably suffered or endured by others; where the assets of one are the liabilities of others. Nevertheless social dynamics usually entail the tendency to change the structure of preferences of those who undergo power, which thus leads them to accept it; and so it becomes domination/authority (*Herrschaft*).

Authority is in addition, and according to Weber, the foundation of all legitimate orders. In other terms, without some degree of acceptance of power by those who sustain it, no social order would be possible at all. However, we evidently face very different realities when confronting the forms of authority typical of traditional societies – where consent is usually the only tacit and based on social inertia (more or less what is commonly called custom, or tradition) – and/or forms of authority typical of modern societies, where diffuse egalitarianism is higher, the levels of mobilization and participation are bigger and the required consent is usually explicit in form.

Weber’s notion of power has behind it a theoretical background, and also a value background, that explicitly refers to Nietzsche’s famous *Wille zur Macht*, which various more recent commentators (Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gianni Vattimo [. . .]) in turn aim to identify with Spinoza’s *potentia agendi*. We should perhaps establish here a provisional abstention on the issue of equivalence, or not, of Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s categories,

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although it is worth mentioning the objection raised by other authors, such as Jan Rehmann, stressing that the democratic egalitarian (and cooperative) inclination of the Spinozian category is in sharp contrast to the paths of distance and hierarchy that defines Nietzsche's idea. Either way, it remains a fact that, as Max Weber pointed out, power, whether be it "new" or "old", past, present or future – must appeal to the acceptance by those who suffer it as a crucial moment in the process of its stabilization under the form of authority.

This aspect notwithstanding, in the Weberian version of the argument the fundamental fact of power does not disappear; and consequently the "zero-sum" version of the story remains in place. In effect, what occurs is that elites are (as a supplement to the exercise of power) also usually capable of inducing such a change in the preference-functions of the masses that renders the endurance of domination painless, or even apparently desirable: either as an effect of habit, due to a moral imperative whose fulfillment is considered a "good in itself", for esthetic motivations that can reach the enthusiasm of genuine devotion to the "charismatic leader", or for some other group of reasons.

Similarly, and still within the sociological tradition, according to Émile Durkheim coercion was supposed to be (along with exteriority and generality) one of the defining traits of social facts – although this did not usually mean displeasure or hardship for individuals, not least because the aforementioned coercion would be exercised par excellence under the form of "soft coercion" (*coertion douce*), that is to say, as a self-imposed command resulting from each individual's moral conscience – indeed a superlative form of manifestation of society. According to Durkheim (and in sharp contrast to the opinion of several others, such as Herbert Spencer), the fact that the importance of this element of moral self-discipline had been on the increase in the trajectory of societies did not mean that society was in a process of dissolution. On the contrary: the rise in the intensity of connections and communications (the so-called "moral density" of societies) had been the most fundamental cause promoting both the autonomous constitution of individuals and their interdependence through the division of labor. This was concomitant with the affirmation in a magnified version of the collective "great being" supposedly correspondent to society itself. Accordingly, both its internal differentiation and the correlative production of diverse individuals serve to indicate its greater richness, density and complexity.

The mainstream of Durkheim's narrative, directly associating communicational flows and changing forms of social organization, certainly enables us to conceptualize more broadly the connection established by Heimans and Timms between power and connectivity, although other mentions, and much closer to us, should obviously be made on this subject. In the literature on networks and social capital and in the trail of authors such as Ronald Burt and Mark Granovetter, it is frequent to see references to the nodal positions of the so-called "gatekeepers" or "social entrepreneurs", as factors simultaneously of the creation of a general surplus of social capital (and in this sense promoters of an interaction said to be "win-win", or of "positive sum") and of the advancement of selfish and even potentially predatory agendas, precisely because of the advantages that such intermediaries placed in crucial positions normally enjoy. "Social entrepreneurship" can thus correspond both to the enactment of a *tertius iungens*, an element that promotes links and in this sense induces a true creation, whether it be of communications, "trade", "social capital" or something similar – and to that of a *tertius gaudens* – a third party that intermediates, benefiting from a position of "middleman", and thus tends to keep it, even if needlessly, by which it largely diverts and inhibits communications or trade, and thus dilapidates social capital.

The analogy to the concepts of "trade creation" and "trade diversion", such as traditionally exposed by economic analysis (following the notorious distinction established by Jacob Viner), befits so obvious that it becomes almost superfluous to mention it. However, it is convenient to go slightly further in the history of economic thought in search of inspirations for this cluster of ideas. For example, let us consider Adam Smith's emphasis in *The Wealth of Nations* on the fact that the alleged major error of the "mercantile system" resided in the assumption that the gain of some

agents in transactions would, in principle, be at the expense of other agents. Instead of this clearly zero-sum mental scheme, Smith presented the counter-argument that the normality of unimpeded trade (and based in consent) consists in it generating advantages for all the intervening parties, resulting in the formation of a true surplus, an authentic extra of wealth: whether as a product of labor which is afterward accomplished through trade, or as a direct creation of trade itself.

The discussions on the productive or unproductive nature of commercial activities subsequently occupied an important position in the tradition of 19th century's political economy, and with regards to this subject a mention needs to be made about the neatly affirmative assessment so made by Jean-Baptiste Say. The French economist also enunciated a theory of productive factors which was explicitly intended to be more detailed and accurate than the usual tripartite scheme of the British "classical political economy". To the usual trio of land, labor and capital, supposedly generating respectively rents, wages and profits, Say added a fourth term, an agent endowed with a *sui generis* creative capacity, in charge of whom would be precisely the connection of the other agents, thereby inducing the triggering of the productive processes. Acting as a catalyst, this agent was designated by Say as "entrepreneur", and the corresponding income was named *profit de l'entrepreneur d'industrie*, distinguishing it from rents, wages and the so-called *profit du capital* – which Say basically identifies with interest. However, unlike the catalysts of chemical reactions, that nothing truly leave in the final output of the procedures, Say's entrepreneur was supposed to genuinely contribute with something new to the wealth-producing process, and so his income should also be considered an additional wealth, rather than the result of a mere transfer or deviation limited to subtracting something from the others and thus harming them.

Based on this reasoning, Say also posits that the French term *entrepreneur*, suggesting someone who earns an income precisely because he is a middle-man – an "entrepreneur" or intermediary – is a rather unfortunate word, inadequate for the designation of this economic position, preferring instead the Italian word *impresario* (although Say also mentions the Spanish correlate *empresario*), despite the common use of that word, which is traditionally employed in the world of arts and spectacles. It should be recalled that *impresario* is the organizer of an artistic initiative – someone who is in charge of setting up a show, such as the premiere of a new musical piece. For example, whereas Mozart authored the music of *The Magic Flute*, Emanuel Schikaneder was the author of the respective script, thus its librettist, but also, crucially, its impresario: its promoter or effective organizer. According to Say, Schikaneder would have been productive in both capacities. This holds true, notwithstanding the fact that the typical work of intellectuals, whether scientists or artists (the one we normally associate with copyrights and royalties), is assumed by Say to be usually unpaid, and thus an expression of generosity or unselfishness – presumably the distinctive trait of this social group[. . .]

It seems impossible to read Heimans and Timms on New Power, explicitly referring it, for example, to notions of open-sourcing and crowdfunding, without recalling these somewhat diffuse ideas of a contribution to productive processes that springs from a genuinely selfless motivation. It is also very difficult not to contemplate the figure of the entrepreneur, who is directly linked by Say with the mediation or connection of various agents, without placing this concept on a parallel footing with the close association of New Power and connectivity – as advanced by Heimans and Timms. The same is generally valid for the emphasis on the positive-sum aspects of economic interactions which is so strongly highlighted by Adam Smith, as opposed to the infamous "mercantile system" (with his "old" mental scheme of zero-sum) and now is referred by Heimans and Timms to "New Power" – incidentally, also with predominant characteristics of flow and not of stock, as, still in accordance with the same Adam Smith, would be case for the subject-matter of economic science: again, oppositely to the mercantile system, that thinks on wealth mostly in terms of stock, of some given finite quantity.

In a somewhat diverse record, the approximation of New Power to Say's entrepreneur also permits to highlight the "dark side" of a certain number of correspondences. According to

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Heimans and Timms, *New Power* tends to be associated with ephemerality, conditionality, whimsy, superficiality and fragmentation. Should we now dare to add: merely performative traits, pose, falsetto, even phoniness? The connection of the figure of the entrepreneur to the arts, the spectacle and the representation can occur in several different ways, such as: “there’s no business like show business”, of course; and “all the world’s a stage, and all men and women merely players”, obviously so. But does this not all culminate in a *ridi pagliaccio*, conveying above all the idea of a radical rarefaction of any-and-all truly reliable connections?

To a certain degree, this gloomy prospect is also present, for example, in *Bowling Alone*, the equally famous work of Robert Putnam, an author for whom recent decades have predominantly produced a systematic erosion of trust, of social connections and, generally speaking, of “social capital”. Although we are likely facing, here too, a merely unilateral diagnosis, this other perspective is certainly worth consider more attentively as a counterweight to the optimism and the (probably unsustainable) lightness of Heimans’ and Stimms’ theses, who present Putnam’s ideas as merely regarding Old Power values. Another work which is easily evocated as being contrary to Heimans’ and Stimms’ book is Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power*, a four-volume work that covers prehistory through to the last turning of century. Mann generically distinguishes four sources of social power: military, economic, political, and ideological and seeks to clarify how they interact in various contexts, suggesting a huge variety of possible dynamics.

Putnam’s theses are evidently very much debatable, and he recognizes that the processes of destruction and creation of “social capital”, and more generally social connections, can occur simultaneously. However, in Putnam’s defense it can also be said that his attitude is consistent with an expression of concern, a cry of alarm about a group of trends which he is far from regarding as inevitable. The drive for direct intervention is easily noticeable, but, by contrast, the purpose of generic theorization is very low. Oppositely, in the case of Mann’s book the theorizing breath is undoubtedly enormous, but its gargantuan dimension makes it likely unpalatable for the latest trends of research in social sciences, already trained predominantly in modalities of academic New Power. However, it would certainly be unfair not to make at least a reference to Mann’s effort, as yet another variety of potential counterweight to the ultra-light cheerfulness of Heimans’ and Stimms’ book.

For these authors, it could be said that agents apparently move in an institutional void – or almost so. In any case that is the theoretical drive, once the generic identification of Old Power with everything that is institution or formal organization is assumed, and consequently also the unstoppable ride toward a social environment of universal cooperation, win-win interactions, egalitarianism, transparency, etc. Heimans and Timms do not merely point out, as endeavored by the analytic tradition of the so-called “human relations” school, the importance of informal aspects besides the formal ones. For they go far beyond this approach, proclaiming that informality, openness, egalitarianism and cooperative networking completely dethrone the formal organizations of the pedestal of their position. But is this really so? As mentioned above, in more sober moments Heimans and Stimms recognize the need to combine Old and New power, as well as the enormous diversity of possible responses to the emerging panorama of values. Simultaneously, they admit that “old” is not necessarily “bad”, and “new” is also not necessarily “good”. Similarly, they are cautions when it comes to classifying degrees of participation – which (in an increasing trend) ranges from “sharing” to “shaping”, followed by “funding”, up until “producing”, through to “co-owning”, finally. Regardless of the unstoppable (or not) nature of this postulated-and-advocated trend, the partial character of what we are facing can now be assumed: a trend, which supposedly counts on a certain level of support, but which also faces resistance; which implies a gradated classification that culminates when it reaches property issues: co-owning.

Accordingly, the *vexata questio* of property does not lose importance, although the underlying assumption in this case is the tendency to dissipate the problems of social inequalities in an environment assumed to be one of universal cooperation and egalitarianism. However, in this context, it would certainly be appropriate to remind

Heimans and Stimms that all participation can become the object of co-optation and an instrument of the reproduction (or even amplification) of hierarchies; and therefore that the power of the masses can be captured and channeled in favor of the preservation of any order and any hierarchy, in effect operating as a “sociological multiplier” of its leaders’ undertakings. Furthermore, this is the normal situation, at least according to the analytical principle identified centuries ago by Thomas Hobbes, who detected that the original seat of all power and all rights lies with the masses – transferred all the same to a position that is and remains necessarily extraneous to it: the position of the “actor”, or representative of the multitude, nevertheless assumed to be the true “author” of the whole practice of sovereignty.

Once again, as with the above-mentioned necessary counterweights to the Spinoza-Nietzsche parallelism, here too it should be noticed that the Hobbesian pathos is one of the absolute exteriority of the actor, who invariably proceeds on behalf of the author, but always placing himself apart and above. On the contrary, Heimans and Timms suggest a direct, immediate, permanent, diffuse, multitudinous and multiform participation. And yet, given that admittedly such participation also assumes traits of superficiality, ephemerality, fragmentation and partition of both the groups and the psychic life of the individuals involved, such an environment is inevitably one of immediacy, whimsicality, predominance of emotion, fad, “easy-coming-easy-going” attitude – which also leads to a tendency for lack of responsibility and alienation. However, democracy obviously cannot exist based on immediate egalitarianism and ephemeral participatory drive alone. It invariably demands mediation, reflection, organized and patient debate, effort, autonomy and critical distancing. All these traits are fairly averse to the primary immediacy, the inclination toward fads, the fragmentary heteronomy, the lightness and futility of momentary fashion, the “fifteen minutes of fame” which Heimans and Timms, deeming to be democratic, want to grant to each and every one of us. However, the truth is that in the absence of these instances of mediation, organization, critical analysis, etc., the drives of those “from below”, reduced to the typical dimension of the flash mob, can be, and are usually appropriated by those “from above” within some institutional framework – since, finally, formal organizations certainly tend to change over time, but only exceptionally (and as an expression of crisis) can be generically regarded as “empty vessels”. One way or another, they always tend to rebuild themselves.

These criticisms notwithstanding, when analyzed from a more narrow perspective, the theses of Heimans and Timms can provide many possible useful clues in relation to specific aspects of socio-economic reality – without, however, having the dimension of great theoretical novelty by which they are presented. Furthermore, the authors are not exactly generous with their references, and thus transmit the impression that they have already begun to assume (and exploit) the transient faddish attitude of the typical reader whom they hope to reach. For example, the idea that the inclination to participate gave rise to a growing appetite of consumers for partake in the production of goods, was already advanced some time ago by various other authors, including Alvin Toffler and George Ritzer – who explicitly employ the correspondent expression of “prosumer” (producer + consumer) to designate the corresponding variety of social realities. Heimans and Timms, of course, cavalierly dismiss these and similar efforts, an aspect that in addition seems to perfectly match their stated insistence on the immediacy of fads and fashions. In fact, the so-called originality of their theses can only be regarded as such in an environment where the ideas of superficiality, immediacy and presentism have already become the “performative” truth. In other words, a situation where nothing and no one has any past or any future, and where everyone can therefore intend to enact or perform, qua “entrepreneurs” of themselves, the so-called novelty of traits which, all taken into consideration, configure no more than a perpetual repetition of the same. As the song goes: “Didn’t I tell you everything is possible in this déjà vu? . . .”

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