Book Review -III


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In the early 1930s, a Jewish man gleefully staring at Der Stürmer, a Nazi propaganda rag baffled his friends. His friends inquired: “Why are you enjoying it so much?” He answers, “if you read Jewish papers, the news is terrible. But, according to this, the news is all good. We control the banks, we control the country and we run the whole world!” Such has been the fate of the Jewish community and especially of the Rothschild Family. A fate which has been marred with hate and envy, which perpetuated itself as a point of discourse and corny theory. Deciphering and de-bunking these theories, Niall Ferguson, through his writings allows readers an alternative and academic perspective. One can string a common thread in the masterful writing of Nial Ferguson as he covers expansive ground citing examples to evidence that networks have existed ever since humanity has. From the structure of the brain to the food chain, from the family tree to freemasonry.

From the ancient Roman civilisation to the dynasties of the Renaissance and finally, from the Founding Fathers to Facebook, The Square and the Tower, sings the song of the rise, fall and renaissance of networks. He depicts how networks transform understanding of both the past and the present. Just as The Ascent of Money put Wall Street into historical perspective, The Square and the Tower does the same for Silicon Valley because it offers a bold prediction about which hierarchies will withstand this latest wave of network disruption–and which will be toppled.

The Great Degeneration (2013) describes the collapse of the institutions on which the West made its success. His book, ‘Civilisation’ which was subtitled, with a market eye on contemporary buzzwords, The Six Killer Apps of Western Power. The Square and Tower: Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power, claims to be “a whole new way of looking at the world”. This is and has been Ferguson’s hyperbole. In ‘The Square’ and the ‘Tower’ he describes the Bavarian “Illuminati” as a secretive group that lasted just a decade and never had more than around 2,000 members as a ‘network’. Similarly, Facebook, which has over a quarter of the human race as members, many of whom seem not nearly secretive enough. Between these extremes come the Jesuits, European royalty in the 19th century, British abolitionists, al-Qaida, the Chinese Communist party and more, all of whom are or were networks, in Niall Ferguson’s rather expansive usage.

Ferguson sets the title of the book using a metaphorical understanding of the tower and the square set in the city of Siena. In Siena, the square and the tower coincide in architectural harmony that draws tourists to the scenic legacy of the Medici family. A family of opulence and vast networks which single-handedly controlled the Renaissance and banking Era of and from Florence. Ferguson’s analysis of human relations and

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political power views the tower standing as a beacon of authority and residence of formal hierarchical authority which has claimed to rule. Whereas, the square, depicts itself as an edifice of organic human congregation and a place of society for informal social networks. Offering these vantage points, according to Ferguson, is an accurate perspective of studying international history and relations as these networks tend to innovate and are responsible for the contagious spread of revolutionary ideas. Ferguson depicts two eras as intensely “networked eras.” The first, late 15th century, after the introduction of the printing press in Europe and the second, “our own time,” which began in the 1970s. The dominant structures of networks survived both world wars, according to Ferguson, with the mid-twentieth century representing the “zenith of hierarchy.” His account shows the ability to navigate and influence these and other nascent networks determined which empires thrived in the reconfigured hierarchical orders.

Indeed, at the heart of Ferguson’s claim is that the world is shaped by two distinct organisational forces: hierarchies and networks. The distinction seems much without a difference. That is because most networks are hierarchical and only a few hierarchies are not part of a wider network. But, for the sake of argument, the book gives an insight that enables Ferguson to make a poignant point. In the book, Ferguson leapfrogs leaves of history extracting compelling empirical facts from one place, intriguing anecdotes from another and forming an amalgam. These ingredients allow him to whip an absorbing, enthralling and powerful narrative of networks and their confluence.

But, there remains one problem. There are multiple strands of distant information. This results in a lack of a coherent thesis to emerge. Indeed, such is Ferguson’s restless desire to uncover connectedness. He notes in the preface, conspiracy theorists see networks as hidden elites in cahoots with the established power structure, while far more often, he argues, networks are the power structure. In the 21st Century, the internet itself is a network of networks. The ability to communicate and transact across vast distances is indeed unprecedented and represented as a basic infrastructure of what has been termed as the “network society”. The book does far more than simply track the use of the word “network” from its introduction in the English language. Rather, he seeks to reframe the entirety of human history as an endless struggle for power between eras in which powerful hierarchical institutions predominate (the Tower) only to be undermined by the influence of emerging networks (corresponding Square). At the end of each struggle, these networks are invariably reconstituted with new hierarchies and the process too, is reconstituted.

Ferguson claims it was the printing press that was largely responsible for three network-based revolutions, namely, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. These were followed by hundreds of years of the hierarchical international order established at the Congress of Vienna. An order dominated by the quintet of Austria, Britain, France, Prussia and Russia leading up to the First World War. But, today, as the world seeks order amongst utter chaos caused by a global pandemic and Cold War II predominantly between the United States of America and China but also between India and China and ASEAN and China, The Square and the Tower compels the reader to re-configure their understanding of networks and hierarchies to understand diplomacy and the intricate design of networks in which it operates. In the
very last section of the book, Ferguson discusses the point of a new world order which bears routes in an older one. That of the United Nations Security Council. The Council was predated by an elegant solution of the quintet of great powers who established themselves as the guardians of order at the Congress of Vienna. Ferguson expresses the requirement of an international order with a similar hierarchical structure to the international order of the Congress of Vienna. That is because if one were to leave it to the networks of Facebook and Twitter then the dream of a global community of netizens communicating would be turned on its head and will result in polarization and viral manias erupting on a global scale. Thus, a network solely dependent on Facebook and Twitter will not be stable.

There needs to be a hierarchical order not exclusively of the United States of America and China rather of a recent quintet, the United Nations Security Council and the five permanent members. The members of the Council are the Congress of Vienna of the 21st century. Even though it is an arbitrary remnant of history. The Council is boosted by legitimacy and authority, globally. The Council’s Resolution garners the world’s attention and compliance. The fact that the five permanent members are five proven victorious States happens to have a privileged position than others. This network creates a similar web of the Congress of Vienna—five powers that outrank the others, permanently. Nonetheless, this exposes a riveting paradox for our time. Is there an opportunity that exists today to use the Council in a way that was impossible in the era after it was created? Because in the Cold War either the Soviets vetoed America’s Resolutions and vice-versa. The one possibility here is that international order could be based on a pre-existing institutional structure that has witnessed historical events. On a personal note, it is a long shot if one believes that China and America is a better idea. That will not suffice. It does not create enough legitimacy for the rest of the world to buy into.

In conclusion, the focal point Ferguson makes in The Square and the Tower is the existence of ‘The Network’, and, or networks’ effect. Ferguson believes they should be the beginning and not the end of an analysis. In other words, the critical questions related to the network’s key characteristics and how it interacts with other networks and hierarchies.