



The Journal of
**HISTORICAL
NETWORK
RESEARCH**

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Book Review: Türme und Plätze. Netzwerke, Hierarchien und der Kampf um die globale Macht

Niall Ferguson. Türme und Plätze.
Netzwerke, Hierarchien und der Kampf
um die globale Macht. Berlin: Propyläen
Verlag 2018. ISBN 9783549074855.
Gebunden, 640 Seiten, 32,00 EUR

Journal of Historical Network Research 8 (2023) 91–97

As one of many building blocks for a design to counterbalance to the history of great men, social networks have been of interest to the historical sciences since the 1970s, or at the latest since the 1990s. Of course, social connections between people have always existed. The interest of historians to research these, and to explain historical events based on interpersonal connections, can also no longer be called recent. Network research has experienced an upswing in recent years due to the increased and simplified use of computer programs to capture and visualize a wide variety of networks. However, not every historical project that talks about networks uses network analysis as a methodological approach, and even fewer of these are computer-based.

Within the field of historical social network analyses there are projects that talk about networks, projects that analyze networks, and projects that apply the methods of digital network analysis. Niall Ferguson's "The Square and the Tower" fits into all three of these categories at the same time.

When Ferguson's book appeared in its first German edition more than 5 years ago, press reaction was mixed.¹ Ferguson's core statement – that networks challenged established hierarchies and thus influenced and changed the course of history – does not suffice. It does not do justice to the complexity of human connections and forms of exercising power. Even though he repeatedly contradicts himself throughout his monograph, the author sticks to his original assessment of agile networkers as underdogs and singular, static power holders (mostly men in this book). This wastes much of the work's potential. His attempt to add complexity by noting that the challenging networks themselves come into positions of power and then lose their driving force also falls short, and would be quickly refuted by individual cases. After all, the author himself repeatedly points out that many great rulers were excellent networkers. Conversely, even so-called grassroots movements are not entirely free of hierarchical structures.²

Niall Ferguson is certainly a historian of some prominence. His books become bestsellers, far beyond the scientific ivory tower. He does not shy away from pointed statements, and at times daring conclusions. Ferguson is also new to the field of network research. A financial and economic historian with a focus on British and European History might note that networks and connections have always played a role in his previous work. This, at least, is a realization that comes to many researchers as they grapple with the theorem of network research. As stated at the outset, networks have always existed.

1 "Rezensionsnotizen," in: Perlentaucher, URL: <https://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/niall-ferguson/tuerme-und-plaetze.html>, last updated 10. 02. 2023.

2 Wessel, Günther: Die Macht und ihre Netzwerke, in: deutschlandfunkkultur, 07. 08. 2018, URL: <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/niall-ferguson-tuerme-und-plaetze-die-macht-und-ihre-100.html>.

“The Square and the Tower” takes the reader on a journey to reveal network research, recapitulate it, and organize what has come before. Ferguson’s compilation of case studies, while arguably striving for its own order, seems eclectic at first glance. The book is divided into nine major chapters with rather interpretive headings, each presenting various case studies in subchapters. After a preface, which likely serves mainly to situate the author himself, rather than the present work, the book begins with an introduction to networks and hierarchies.

Ferguson starts his book by rooting the thinking about networks in conspiracy theories. Only after a reference to the Illuminati does he approach the statement that networks are currently omnipresent and network-like structures can be discerned everywhere. After a brief conceptual history of networks and hierarchies, he turns to the state of research – the history of network analysis (Seven Bridges, Weak ties, ...) and an overview of the types of networks.³ Besides ego and total networks, he introduces hierarchies as a special kind of network⁴. In the extremely helpful Figure 8 on network variants, there is also a network model called *hierarchical-modular*.⁵ This arrangement originally comes from mechanics, but in the reviewer’s opinion it is also interesting for historical interpretation.⁶ The theoretical work elaborated on in this chapter provides a basic insight into historical network research, but appears by no means exhaustive, especially considering the examples discussed throughout the book.

The second chapter focuses on “Emperors and Explorers”. After another short introduction to hierarchies, which could have been part of the first chapter, Ferguson starts the first Networked Age in the late Middle Ages. From around the Renaissance to the Reformation, he focuses primarily on economies (Medici) and Christian explorers (Portuguese), combining economies and exploration in “Pizarro and the Inca.” The chapter ends with the dissemination of the Luther Bible through Gutenberg’s printing.

The beginning of the increased dissemination of written material is the segue into the third chapter, “Letters and Lodges,” which ranges from the Reformation to the Revolution (in France). By also understanding the printing press and the Reformation as revolutions, Ferguson unifies this second space as an era of the revolutionary exchange of ideas. Revolutionary and epistolary networks provide the examples for this section.

3 Ferguson, Niall (2018): *Türme und Plätze. Netzwerke, Hierarchien und der Kampf um die globale Macht*. Transl. Helmut Reuter. Berlin: Propyäen, pp. 48–66.

4 Ferguson, Fig. 9, p. 65.

5 Ferguson, Fig. 8, p. 64.

6 Vgl. Junker, F. (1995): Modular-hierarchisch strukturierte Modellbildung mechanischer Systeme. *Arch. Appl. Mech.* 65, 227–245. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00805463>.

In Chapter Four, after this revolutionary phase, “The Restoration of the Hierarchy” is covered by the author, which concerns the great houses of enduring nobility, along with the rise of industrialists and bankers. The subchapter on the Rothschilds is particularly captivating, with the expertise evidenced by Fergusson’s major monographs. A density of information is evident here that is lacking in other chapters.

The colonialism of the British Empire is the main subject of the fifth chapter, “Knights of the Round Table.” Beginning with a focus on the British Empire, he then introduces the Qing Dynasty in the subchapter “Taiping” as the antipode to the British which, despite digressions on the Netherlands and the German Empire, dominates this chapter.

After the events of recent years, Chapter Six, “Plagues and Pipers,” appears particularly relevant. However, the focus is not on the global spread of disease, as might be suspected nowadays. The Spanish flu does provide the prelude to the period since World War I, but it is then replaced by Ferguson’s other plague-like pipers – namely the Bolsheviks and the fascists, whose legacy he also sees inscribed in the economic and social organization of England and America, as one must interpret the chapter’s division.

In “Own the Jungle,” Ferguson jumps right into the Cold War. The author denies that the early phase of the Cold War produced networks, and that it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that networks were formed, which ultimately caused the Soviet Union to collapse.⁷ Just a few pages later, recalling his current research project, Ferguson outlines Richard Nixon’s and Henry Kissinger’s first-person networks.⁸ This is one of countless examples that show the ambivalence of Ferguson’s concept of networks. On the one hand, he desperately wants to understand them as something subversive; on the other hand, his own research shows the networks of power.

With Chapter Eight, “The Library of Babel,” the author approaches the present era with great strides. Beginning with 9/11, and thus the incursion of real terrorist threats into the reality of life in the westernized world, this chapter goes on to deal with the Internet and in particular the development of social networks, which from this book’s perspective appear to have become a haven for terrorist networks and the electorate of Donald Trump.

The final chapter, “Metropolis,” then provides a look at contemporary issues, which the author has attempted to keep current with an updated afterword to the

7 Ferguson, p. 317.

8 Ferguson, figs. 30, 31, pp. 344–345

new edition (written before the pandemic). Here, as so often in his publications and pronouncements, Ferguson departs from the terrain of history and historical scholarship; he is primarily concerned with a potential collapse of the “hierarchical world order of nation-states” through a global “network of economic complexity.” After listing various studies, graphs, illustrations and studies in the previous chapters, this one seems less evidence-based.

In the epilogue, “The Original Square and Tower”, the author launches a final attempt to explain his interpretation of hierarchies and networks, namely of towers and squares as two human forms of organization. For Ferguson, the world remains one of squares and towers.⁹ Despite this stubbornly defended dichotomy, which disrupts the flow of the book in so many places, it is a great pleasure to flip through the various approaches to network representations and investigations. For this is precisely where the book’s potential lies: it is a kind of catalog for network research. It is a parforceride through large parts of world history with a sharp network focus. The assembled illustrations are a history of network visualization in themselves. Beginning with the pedigree-like ancestors of network research, the organizational charts of companies in the early 1920s,¹⁰ through the sociological network representations of the early 1990s,¹¹ to Ferguson’s insight into his own workshop (network representations from a research project on Kissinger and Nixon¹²), one finds diverse styles, programs, and scales of networks.

In summary, the volume is a collection of many themes and aspects that can be productively explored through focusing on social networks. The selection and grouping of the examples, which could only be rudimentarily reflected in this brief summary, is particularly noteworthy. Here, above all, the work of the experienced and successful historian is evident. Thus, although the work is sorted chronologically, chronology does not appear to be the main criterion for structure because of the editing and grouping of the material. Rather, Ferguson draws attention to different types of networking and different purposes of networking. Ferguson’s networks are – if this interpretation is permitted to the reviewer – geographic, knowledge-based, capitalist, imperial, totalitarian, democratic, and digital. In the end, they are all also forms of power, a fact that is not discussed prominently due to the author’s different interpretation of networks and hierarchies.

9 Ferguson, p. 504.

10 Ferguson, Fig. 27, p. 303.

11 Ferguson, Fig. 10, p. 93.

12 Ferguson, Fig. 30–33, p. 344–347.

The weighting of the topics presented is also not always entirely consistent. The focus is clearly on England, which can be explained by the author's expertise, but within such a comprehensive work he could reasonably have devoted a little more space to the networks and hierarchies outside Western Europe, which he certainly knows and mentions. Likewise, networks of minorities and the powerless could have taken up even more space. (Female) networks knocking on the glass ceilings of patriarchy, resistance networks against totalitarian regimes, forms of networking that demonstrate solidarity and community in times of oppression – such examples might have been more in tune with the author's original idea of Towers and Squares.

The volume does not evaluate the projects presented, nor does it critically question the respective approach. In the networks studied, was exactly this procedure and selection of information helpful to answer the research question? Are the visualizations readable, interpretable? Could the desired conclusions have been visualized in other ways? These questions are not discussed in Ferguson's book. Here, the potential for an advancement of network research is lost. In such a comprehensive historical presentation, a critical reflection on the added value and utility of different network representations at different times would have been appropriate. Furthermore, it seems questionable whether every graphic in which points are connected by lines is a network. Perhaps a tighter framework for the selection would have been helpful.

The modular-hierarchical network mentioned in the introductory chapter also appears to be a missed opportunity. With its help, the towers and squares of Sienna could have been wonderfully expanded into a mind palace: towers with larger, network-like platforms connected by stairs, some of them enclosed by glass ceilings, with some platforms containing trapdoors. The squares could have been further imagined as impassable terrains where, depending on the infrastructure, different actors could be brought together. These could thus form mental maps that take up the not unattractive idea of towers and squares and endow them with complexity.

However, this space was instead filled with anecdotes and bon mots from Ferguson's own scientific and social interconnectedness in the book, which in the German translation is still over 500 pages long. And even within these, the misleading use of networks and hierarchy is not critically reflected upon. For it is precisely scientific careers that have the potential to trace hierarchical networks and power relations, since it is seldom singular genius that counts here, but often the influence of networks in which – depending on the epoch – sometimes one, and sometimes the other is lifted up.

Thus, the question of towers and squares that gives the book its title appears to be stimulating for readers after all, precisely because it remains unquestioned in the book itself. What stands above all at the end of this work is inspiration.

This Piñata¹³ of historical networks is not the answer to all questions; rather, it triggers new ones and has successfully demonstrated the potential of networked thinking and research.

13 Kilb, Andreas: "Ein Weltdenker lässt keine Rätsel übrig," in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 31. 07. 2018, URL: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/sachbuch/niall-fergusons-neues-buch-tuerme-und-plaetze-15700904-p2.html>.