

Review - The End of Power

Written by Tristan Abbott

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TRISTAN ABBOTT, MAR 7 2015

The End of Power

By Moisés Naím

New York: Basic Books, 2013

In his inaugural reading list, Mark Zuckerberg selected Moisés Naím's *The End of Power*, which tackles geopolitics, religious trends, and the world of business. In demonstrating how smaller entities such as Zuckerberg's Facebook have become so successful, *The End of Power* looks at trends of power and posits that power in the world is losing its bite.

Naím's book takes a fresh look at the evolution of power in the world. It states that power is decaying in the world and not, as some have proposed, been diffused or simply redistributed. The underlying factors driving both theories are very similar: power is either decaying or diffusing because of advancements in technology and the ability of smaller entities – called *micropowers* by Naím – to be consistently more flexible than their larger and more established counterparts.

There are aspects of these ideas that are not new, as Joseph Nye wrote in 1990 about the changing dynamic of power in the world, saying "Another trend in the diffusion of power is the spread of modern technology, which has enhanced the capabilities of backward states (162)." The notable difference in Nye's theory is that power was shifting away from more traditional actors towards those in the Third World, thus presenting a multipolar world system. Naím takes a different view of this in his book, believing that modern innovations have left power less potent than it is usually thought to be.

Naím starts out the book by outlining his basic arguments and most importantly defines power and what it means when he says that power is *decaying*: "To put it simply, power no longer buys as much as it did in the past (2)." His first, of many, examples, to demonstrate and support this idea comes from the world of competitive chess, where he is able to show how advances in technology have led to higher rates of turnover within the top ranks of worldwide chess players. People from all over the world are now able to use computers to simulate high-level chess games. This example demonstrates how increases in technology have led to a reduction of traditional barriers to entry.

This is a sensible argument when looking at the world of chess, but applied to other ideas such as wealth inequality it appears to be hard to swallow. Considering the great levels of wealth inequality that have been coming to light, it seems nonsensical to say that power is dissolving in the world. Recent popular works such as Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* highlight trends of wealth accumulation in the world, demonstrating the increased levels of wealth inequality. The top 1% of the world's population possessing more and more of the world's wealth is a very popular (and terrifyingly real) subject that would seem to point out that power in the world is becoming more centralized, not decaying.

While Naím does acknowledge that wealth has become more centralized, he believes that it is less influential than it has been, meaning that those who control that wealth have less power than they have had. In defining power as the "the capacity to get others to do, or stop doing, something (1)," Naím points to his belief that this centralization of wealth in the world, while a very real problem, presents less of an issue than if it had occurred in the past.

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Looking at the world of business and finance, Naím looks at mobile entities such as small hedge funds and their ability to weather? and even thrive in the new international financial climate; as opposed to their larger and much more established counterparts in the world of business. He states that “the big challengers to the dominant big banks are the hedge funds and other new financial players that have access to resources as deep as those of the large banks yet can move faster with far more flexibility (161).” While traditionally large and dominant firms have not disappeared completely, they have become weakened and are no longer vulnerable to competition to much smaller and mobile entities.

Naím presents three facets of modernity that have primarily led to the dissolution of power: the *More* revolution, the *Mobility* revolution, and the *Mentality* revolution. The primary actors in these revolutions are small, mobile entities. Naím deems them *micropowers*, or ‘small, unknown, or once-negligible actors that have found a way to undermine, fence in, or thwart the mega-players, the large bureaucratic organizations that previously controlled their field (50).’

As products of various aspects of modernity, the three revolutions that Naím presents have worked together to promote the dissolution of power. The *More* revolution is a convergence of advances in technology, namely the Internet and large spurts of growth in human population. More people with more access to technology and health care have changed the way that populations act and react to governments and large corporations. The *Mobility* revolution, in the form of the ease at which people and information can move around the globe; in turn plays an impactful role in the mobilization of people and ideas. The *Mentality* revolution, while much harder to quantify, is demonstrated through changes in expectations that general populations are having of their governments, churches, and large corporations.

In his analysis of the decline of power in the military and political sphere, Naím points to globalization in addition to the proliferation of weapons as primary factors in the more level playing field that we see today. The proliferation of weapons, in addition to how cheap and available they are, is seen as an important factor in reducing how influential traditional militaries are in the world. Two specific weapons – drones and IEDs – are seen as emblematic of the shift in world military might as they are impersonal, cheap, and easy to use, allowing those without superior military might to keep pace with those who do.

Furthermore, the inter-connectedness of globalization is tied to the decrease in power of national governments in the past decades. The (perceived or real) decline of United States hegemony has left the world in a place where there is no dominant power, where no single country is able to completely impose its will on others. A balance of power has then emerged that has promoted a sort of international paralysis akin to that in the domestic sphere where a level playing field has left it so that it is hard for anyone to do anything.

In looking at religious institutions, Naím concludes that the same trends that have been impacting global business, politics, and war, have been equally impactful for churches. In particular, the ability for small churches to appear and thrive is connected to their ability to adapt to their surroundings and environment better and faster than their larger and more-established counterparts. Without the stringent hierarchy and traditional barriers to entry such as literacy that are emblematic of more established churches, these smaller entities are able to adapt and grow very quickly.

The value in this book lies in its sharp analysis of modern day power-dynamics, making it a worthwhile read. It offers a clear snapshot of power in the present day, as well as how power has developed in the past. However, it places too much emphasis on modern times and trends. Naím’s theories, while sound, are built upon technological and societal innovations (the three revolutions) that favor smaller and mobile entities. They also assume that further innovations in the future will continue to do the same, instead of favoring larger and more established entities. Nye observed the same shifts in 1990 after the fall of the Soviet Union, and while technological and societal innovations have favored Third World countries since then, the developed world has been able to utilize them as well, thus maintaining some level of power.

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