
Governments Change, Power Remains

*On the Historical Unification of Power, the Reality Paradigm and
the Onopticon*

A MANIFESTO FOR DE-ONOPTICISATION

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*“Why is it that, the world over, governments change and yet the
fates of societies do not?”*

OPENING JUDGEMENT

Power was not one throughout history. It became one.

We speak here of no immutable human nature, no metaphysical evil standing above the ages, no hidden centre that has governed the world since the beginning of history. The unity of Power was historically constructed.

Overseas trade bound distant geographies into a single field of circulation. Colonialism carried law, credit, cartography and military logistics across continents. After 1945, law, finance, security and technical standards were bound to common institutions. The end of the Cold War dissolved the capacity for an equivalent counter-coalition. Synchronous digital networks, finally, rendered the single person recognisable, classifiable and addressable on a global scale.

What emerged is neither a world state nor a secret organisation. It is an adaptable supra-alliance capable of combining law, finance, diplomacy, technology, culture, intelligence, security and military execution as the target requires.

We call this **unified Power**. Its contemporary and integral name is the **Onopticon**. Its logic of constructing reality is the **Reality Paradigm**.

I

Power is imposition

Power is imposition. Power is domination.

Power is the determination of another's conditions of reality whilst excluding that other's equal capacity for decision. In its completed form it does not merely decide; it forecloses the very paths by which a counter-decision might arise.

Not every binding decision is Power. Decisions grounded in public authorisation — visible in their source, defined in their limits, open to effective objection and capable of being reversed — are the acts of legitimate local authority. What distinguishes Power is the invisibility of the decision's source, the closure of the paths to counter-decision, the transfer of sanction across the domains of life, and its ungovernability by society.

The problem is not that decisions exist. The problem is that no capacity for decision can be constituted against them.

II

Unity is not a single centre but a unity of outcome

Unity is not total consensus, a single ideology, a fixed organisation or the will of one person. It is the capacity of heterogeneous mechanisms to produce binding outcomes, in the same direction, upon a target.

Law may speak the language of law, finance of payment, security of risk; institutions may retain their formal autonomy. But where their outputs converge into closure upon the same single person, society or state, decisional unity has come into being.

The unity of Power lies not in an organisational centre but in the unity of decision, outcome and closure.

III

The object of Power is not the rival, but the rival's possibility of combination

The achievement of unified Power is not the defeat of its target but the prior foreclosure of the target's paths to constituting an equivalent counter-power.

A state may remain sovereign on paper. Yet if it can find no deterrent ally, construct no alternative financing, obtain no technical capacity, and if those who would assist it are barred by secondary sanctions, then counter-coalition closure has occurred.

The necessary criterion by which a mechanism becomes a subset of Power is this:

That it closes, directly or indirectly, the paths by which counter-power might be composed.

Finance may prevent resources from becoming procurement; technology, money from becoming capacity; diplomacy, support from becoming alliance; law, assistance from becoming legitimate action; culture, objection from becoming institution. The mechanisms do not perform the same task; they govern different junctures of the same closure.

IV

The world wars were wars of plural powers

In the world wars, coalitions fought one another. Each side could constitute financing, production, diplomacy, military alliance and a rival claim to world order. The global scale of those wars demonstrates not that Power was one, but that great combinations of comparable weight existed.

After unification, the structure of war changed. The institutionalised supra-coalition moves against an isolated target in the name of “common order”: the target is defined, isolated and removed from circulation; military intervention becomes the terminal execution of a decision already taken. The name of war changes too: security operation, humanitarian intervention, stabilisation. The change of name is not innocent; it converts a rival sovereign into an object upon which order passes judgement.

V

The criterion of plurality is not capacity, but the outside

We anticipate an objection: “The coalitions of the world wars also imposed embargoes, mounted blockades and registered populations. If the mechanisms are the same, were they not one Power? And if they count as separate, why do the powers now building their own financing and alliances not count as separate too?”

Our answer: the criterion of plurality is neither the difference of techniques nor the equivalence of capacities.

The criterion of plurality is the material existence of a structural outside.

In the world of 1939 a structural outside existed between the blocs: the decisions, records and classifications of one bloc were not automatically binding within its rival. This does not mean that everyone could leave easily — the borders were closed to most, and the price of being unable to leave was grievous. But a rival field of law, circulation and sovereignty existed materially; the blocs used similar techniques, yet could not complete one another’s decisions upon the single person.

Today, passage between two centres is subject to the same order of recognition and addressing. A diagnosis produced in one circuit is read in the other. The centres conflict with one another; yet, for the single person, they jointly produce the absence of exit.

To be able to choose between two blocs is not, of itself, an outside. The structural outside is not the absence of any record of oneself in any Power; it is the condition in which the records, classifications and judgements produced within one decision circuit are not automatically recognised, completed and executed within the decisive infrastructures of a rival sovereign domain.

What counts as a decisive infrastructure is defined not by a judgement of importance but by the criterion of Section III: an infrastructure is decisive to the degree that exclusion from it effectively closes the paths of counter-composition.

In the era of the world wars plurality existed, because the decision of one bloc could not be completed automatically within the decisive infrastructures of its rival. The criterion of today's unification is not that all centres think alike, nor that every decision carries universal validity. The criterion is that records have become interoperable across the decisive infrastructures of the global field of transaction, and that the single person can no longer escape the consequences of the decision circuit merely by changing centre.

VI

The three thresholds of unification

1945 — Institutionalisation. The common field of transaction in global law, finance, security and technical standards was established.

The end of the Cold War — the dissolution of counter-equivalence. The capacity for a counter-coalition equivalent to the upper system was broken.

Synchronous digital networks — the addressability of the single person. The constitutive threshold is not the digitalisation of finance but the capacity of digital networks to render the single person recognisable and addressable anywhere in the world.

1945 built Power's institutions; 1991, its freedom from counter-equivalence; synchronous digital networks, its direct reach to the single person.

VII

The Reality Paradigm

Truth has not disappeared. The paths by which truth becomes reality have been closed.

Under the Truth Paradigm, alternative institutions, counter-coalitions and a structural outside are possible; truth can rival Power. Under the Reality Paradigm there is criticism, opposition, election and protest; but their conversion into institution, resource and binding counter-decision can be prevented.

Power determines which options are possible, lawful, safe and realistic. It grants the subject the capacity to choose, whilst retaining the rules by which the options are produced.

The capacity to choose is not the capacity to constitute.

We call this **menu freedom**: the subject may choose from the menu, but cannot determine who composed it or what was left off it. For Power, the production of possibilities and the closure of possibilities are one and the same operation.

VIII

The Onopticon

The Onopticon is not merely surveillance, nor algorithm, nor platform. It is the integration of law, finance, diplomacy, state, security, education, intelligence and military execution within synchronous digital networks. The digital network is not a neutral instrument that happened to fall into Power's hands; it is the nervous system of unified Power.

The Onopticon recognises the single person before any encounter, classifies them, structures their field of possibility in advance, executes the decision before effective objection, transfers the outcome into other domains of life, and converts that outcome into the input of further decisions:

Recognition → classification → decision → execution → cross-domain consequence → feedback

The Panopticon disciplines by making the person feel that they may be watched; the Onopticon has no need of this — it prepares in advance the reality the person will encounter. Surveillance capitalism explains the economic exploitation of behavioural data; the Onopticon explains an order of closure that operates even where the profit motive is absent.

Our claim to originality is this:

Heterogeneous mechanisms, without a common visible centre, can through synchronous networks convert the single person into a shared object of decision, close the paths of counter-composition, and turn the outcome into a feedback circuit of domination.

IX

The state is not Power itself, but its visible interface

Society rarely meets Power directly; it meets courts, governments, banks, platforms and schools. It therefore mistakes the executor of the decision for its source.

Power → state interface → society

The state translates the upper decision into the local language of law, applies it, and draws social objection upon itself. Governments can be changed and statutes annulled; these are real consequences. But if the upper decision circuit persists through other mechanisms, Power has not changed.

The state is also a cost — of representation, of law, of visible responsibility. Power seeks to reduce that cost: it preserves the concept of the state whilst scaling down its content — less public service, more automation; less local discretion, more global standard; fewer visible decisions, stronger identification. “You are forbidden” gives way to “the system does not permit it”; the decision sheds its political appearance and presents itself as technical necessity.

The state is not abolished. Emptied of its public content, it is converted into Power’s costless interface.

X

Centres and hegemons change; Power does not

The centre of Power was once concentrated in London, then in Washington; tomorrow it may concentrate in Beijing. Just as a company that relocates its headquarters does not thereby become a new company, a change of geography does not constitute a new Power.

Power belongs to no state; states are Power's replaceable carriers, interfaces and points of concentration.

That China or Russia stands in conflict with the Western-centred order does not place them outside the Onopticon. A payment system built as an alternative to SWIFT may likewise recognise persons, bind access to political decision, and close the paths of counter-composition. Such a channel is not de-onoptic; it is the same capacity for domination, operated from another centre.

Opposition to the West is not opposition to the Onopticon. An alternative centre is not an alternative logic of Power.

The hegemon, likewise, is not Power itself but the principal node in which Power concentrates in a given era. When the hegemon changes, the currency, the language of legitimacy, the technical standards and the daily life of society may all change. But if society cannot choose its hegemon, cannot reach the source of the upper decision and cannot compose a counter-combination, the structural relation has not changed.

Hegemons change; but society does not become the subject that decides upon the hegemon.

To be better governed is not to have governed oneself.

X I

The retrospective legitimization of the former hegemon

When the domination of a new hegemon feels harsher or more foreign, society begins to remember the previous era as an era of freedom. The old domination was lived as natural order; the harshness of the new techniques renames it, retrospectively, as “freedom”, “stability” or “the normal course of things”.

“Things were better when America was hegemon” may be true of particular conditions of life. It does not show that the earlier domination was not domination.

More bearable domination is not freedom.

Whilst society is pressed to choose between two hegemons, the real question remains invisible:

Why must society live under any hegemon at all?

XII

The Conceptual Arbitrage of regimes

The distinctions between democracy, autocracy and hybrid regime have real consequences for daily life, for the space of speech, and for the coercion to which people are exposed. But to count each regime form as a separate Power is a state-centred illusion.

Unified Power does not govern all societies by the same technique; it employs different interfaces according to a society's historical structure and capacity for resistance. In the democratic interface: elections, representation, legal procedure and expert bodies. In the autocratic interface: open censorship, the security apparatus and the cult of the leader.

The methods differ. But where society cannot reach the source of the upper decision, and objection cannot become binding counter-decision, the difference of method does not constitute two separate Powers.

The length of the rope, and the question of who holds it, are not the same question.

That one tether is looser than another is a real difference for the one who lives it. But a longer rope does not mean that the direction of movement is determined by the subject.

Society can change its government; it cannot determine the financial, legal and security terrain upon which that government must move. Thus a change of government is presented as a change of Power.

XIII

Decisional unity beneath expressive plurality

The Onopticon does not require that everyone think alike. People may criticise, protest and vote. But where none of this can become independent institution, resource or binding counter-decision, the closure continues.

The right of objection is not the power of objection.

Objection that cannot become decision lends the system its pluralist appearance, discharges social tension, and supplies Power with risk data:

Objection → data → risk analysis → mechanism adjustment → renewed closure

Power's cultural achievement is not that everyone thinks the same, but that those who think differently cannot construct a different reality.

X I V

A population is not a society

Before the Onopticon there is, at first, no society; there is an addressed population. The population is user, consumer, voter, debtor, data profile, risk category. The Onopticon processes the person under separate identities in separate systems, and when required unites those identities upon a single object of sanction.

People may suffer the same domination; but so long as they do not see its common source, they do not form a society. They live their troubles as the failings of separate institutions, or as personal failure.

The Onopticon does not hide its parts. It hides that its parts belong to the same Power.

X V

The constitutive variable of the passage from population to society is quantity

The transformation of population into society is no miraculous awakening. The operative word is **quantity** — yet not mere headcount, but four components:

1. **Arithmetical quantity:** the number of those who recognise the onoptic whole.
2. **Connective quantity:** the density with which those who recognise are aware of one another's recognition.
3. **Temporal quantity:** the conversion of recognition from passing reaction into standing judgment.
4. **Strategic quantity:** the position of those who recognise within the workings of institutions.

A million isolated people may prove less effective than a hundred thousand connected ones.

Addressed population → critical quantity → society

The critical threshold is no fixed percentage; it is the moment at which recognition alters the system's capacity for self-reproduction. Its signs: Power's classifications lose their validity among broad publics; institutional staff cease to execute onoptic decisions as routine duty; singular punishment produces solidarity; Power is driven from invisible operation to open force; concessions fail to dissolve the common diagnosis.

There is a historical instance of this mechanism; but we must place it correctly.

1989 was not a case of de-onopticism within the completed sovereignty of the Onopticon. It occurred in the final phase of the Truth Paradigm, under conditions in which a structural outside still existed. It nonetheless demonstrated one thing decisively: whilst the material apparatus of coercion stood in place until the final day, the withdrawal of social legitimacy can dissolve a regime's capacity to execute. Border guards opened the gates; print workers declined to set the censor's text; security forces did not carry out the order to disperse. Punishment produced solidarity rather than fear.

What those regimes lost was not their instruments. It was the social acceptance of their claim to speak in society's name.

But we must be honest: the existence of the outside played its part in the success of 1989. Those who withdrew legitimacy knew that another order stood upon the horizon. Under the conditions of the Onopticon, that ease does not exist. The mechanism, then, is proven; whether it can operate under conditions without an outside is a question whose answer this theory cannot declare in advance, and which only its research programme can test.

XVI

The usurpation of legitimacy: the legal is not the legitimate

The sovereignty of the Onopticon does not rest upon force alone. Its true achievement is its use of a social legitimacy that does not belong to it. The real source of the decision is the upper circuit; its visible executor is the state; its declared source of legitimacy is society:

Upper decision → state act → the appearance of social will

The Onopticon produces no legitimacy; it usurps what society produces. It uses society's labour, taxes, data and trust in law — and then puts them to work in closing society's capacity for counter-decision.

The Onopticon works against society with society's own resources.

When society sees that the visible institutions are not the final source of decision, it draws the distinction:

What is legal is not, of necessity, legitimate.

That a decision has been enacted by a competent institution does not prove that society authorised it. A legitimate decision must be visible, contestable, reversible and governable by society. When society refuses the transfer, the conceptual arbitrage breaks.

XVII

Society's constitutive declaration, and the shift of symmetry

Seeing is not enough. Recognition must reach critical quantity and become public judgement. Society's declaration is this:

This decision was not taken in our name. The legal form of the institution that executes it does not prove its social legitimacy. We refuse the use, by domination, of a legitimacy that belongs to us.

This is no petition. We ask no mercy of Power; we withdraw the social acceptance of an authority it never possessed.

The declaration is not words alone: it is the withdrawal of labour, obedience, data and institutional co-operation from the onoptic circuit.

Common recognition + critical quantity + public declaration + functional
withdrawal = the breaking of the circuit of legitimacy

Society need not possess money, arms or surveillance to match the Onopticon. Symmetry shifts not through the equalisation of instruments, but through the return of legitimacy to its true owner. Power does not at once lose its material instruments; it loses the privilege of wielding them in society's name.

This is not a transfer of Power, but the annulment of a false relation of authorisation.

XVIII

Recognition is not a single moment of liberation

Recognition is not an irreversible moment of deliverance. Power may seek to fragment the common diagnosis through concession, prosperity, fear, nationalism, a change of visible rulers, and the capture of concepts. It cannot produce legitimacy by force; but it can labour to rearrange society's perception of legitimacy.

Recognition is not completed liberation; it is a new phase of the struggle over legitimacy.

Common recognition can fail: if critical quantity dissolves; if it cannot spread to the strategic institutions; if society is divided once more into identities; if the bond between the state and the upper circuit becomes invisible again; if social defence turns into a new centre of domination. These possibilities do not weaken the theory; they specify the conditions of its failure.

XIX

We do not say de-onopticisation is without conflict; we say self-defence has a limit

Power will not stand passive before the exposure of its usurped legitimacy: it classifies the diagnosis as extremism, divides quantity into identities, addresses strategic persons singly, converts objection into a security threat, and, when required, uses open force.

But to enter into conflict is not to found a new domination. Society may organise to produce common decisions and to defend itself. That organisation becomes counter-Power the moment it turns into a decision centre independent of society, irreversible and beyond objection.

No instrument of defence may become a capacity that is permanent, irreversible, beyond objection, able continuously to address the single person, and able to carry a decision from one domain of life into all others.

Society remains society so long as it constitutes itself as the source of legitimacy. The moment it makes itself the source of incontestable decision, it becomes Power once more.

X X

Power can use force; it cannot produce legitimacy

Power can arrest, scatter connections, impose costs and delay transformation. We do not deny it. But there is one thing force cannot do: restore a legitimacy that has been lost.

Obedience is not legitimacy. Enforcement is not legitimate government.

Open force exposes the very distinction the Onopticon conceals: it shows that the state apparatus protects not society's will, but a decision circuit outside society. The more force Power uses, the stronger it may appear — and the more surely it confirms that it is not the source of its own legitimacy. 1989 stands as the historical witness that force cannot restore a legitimacy already dissolved.

Power can suppress society; it cannot compel society to hand its own legitimacy back to Power.

X X I

Seeing the serpent

The Onopticon resembles an unseen serpent. So long as it remains unseen, the source of the danger is unknown; people fight the wrong targets, and mistake the visible institutions for Power itself. When the serpent is seen it does not vanish; it can still strike, and still poison. But it loses the advantage born of invisibility.

Society need not become a serpent to be rid of one, for their purposes are not the same. Power wishes to dominate; society, to take back its common life. Power closes possibilities; society opens the possibilities that were closed.

One need not become a serpent to fight one.

XXII

De-onopticism is not the destruction of institutions

De-onopticism is the severing of the decision thresholds at which institutions are bound to the On-opticon:

- The state is not destroyed; it ceases to be Power's costless interface.
- Law is not abolished; it is opened to the audit of social legitimacy.
- Finance is not eliminated; it is separated from the function of sanction that compels political obedience.
- Digital networks are not dismantled; their capacity for limitless addressing and cross-domain consequence is bounded.
- The institutions of security are not destroyed; they are bound to society's limited and visible authority.

Power did not create these institutions from nothing; it infiltrated what had already been built. Society, therefore, need not build a second state, law or finance outside.

Society does not build a new world outside; it recognises the Power that has infiltrated its own world, and severs the connections.

XXIII

Temporal Conceptual Arbitrage

The Reality Paradigm preserves the names and inherited legitimacy of the old concepts, whilst replacing their operational content:

Preserved concept	Historical referent	New operational referent
State	Sovereign centre of decision	Scaled-down local interface
Democracy	Collective capacity for decision	Selection of visible rulers
Opposition	Alternative capacity for decision	Objection within the system
Resistance	Material counter-organisation	Feedback data
Exit	Passage to another field of transaction	Change of node within the same network
Freedom	Capacity to constitute possibility	Choice among prepared options

The signifier is preserved, the old legitimacy inherited, the content replaced. When society recognises the Onopticon, it sees the divergence between the concepts and their functions; the yield of the arbitrage begins to fall.

XXIV

Our judgement upon the literature

Foucault explained the plural relations of power; we say that contemporary Power has historically unified. Arendt defined power as the capacity to act in concert; we give that capacity the name not of Power but of Power's adversary — society. Deleuze saw continuous control; we explain the threshold at which control becomes counter-composition closure. Luhmann defended functional differentiation; we say that outcomes can unify whilst differentiation is preserved. Zuboff explained surveillance capitalism; we set out the dimension of closure — legal, security-bound, counter-compositional — that exceeds the profit motive. Hardt and Negri named the decentred, networked global sovereignty Empire; we explain how that architecture returns to the single person as decision, carries consequence across domains, and closes the capacity for counter-composition.

We answer two objections directly.

From the Foucauldian tradition: "Power produces resistance wherever it is exercised; unified closure ignores this." We do not ignore it. Our claim is not the absence of resistance, but the closure of the paths by which resistance becomes counter-composition. The Onopticon does not prevent resistance; it absorbs it before it becomes decision. Micro-resistance is real; that micro-resistance dissolves macro-closure has not yet been shown.

From the Luhmannian tradition: "Functional systems cannot speak one another's language; how does decisional unity overcome the problem of translation?" It does not; it has no need to. Systems can close

upon the same single person without understanding one another. Law and finance need not agree upon what a score means; it suffices that the score is written to the same person.

Unity is constituted not in meaning, but in the address.

We do not speak in order to repeat these thinkers. The claim of the Onopticon is to show at which historical threshold the mechanisms they separately diagnosed became a common, synchronous whole of domination, addressed to the single person.

XXV

Theoretical discipline

This manifesto claims no exemption from evidence. Every local claim of the Onopticon must be tested: Is there prior recognition? Does classification produce binding consequence? Can objection arrive within effective decision time? Is the decision carried into other domains of life? Are the paths of counter-composition closed?

Where these criteria are absent, no strong onoptic closure can be asserted in the case at hand. The historical images in this text are subject to the same discipline: the narrative of 1989 serves in the manifesto as a collective image; in the academic edition each event will be documented separately by country, date and source.

The Onopticon is not a metaphor that explains everything; it explains a single mechanism: the combination of different instruments upon the same target so as to close the capacity for counter-decision. The manifesto declares the diagnosis; the research programme tests its mechanisms.

XXVI

We pass no judgement upon what follows the Onopticon

The question “Will Power persist after the Onopticon?” attempts to structure, in advance and in the categories of the present paradigm, the subject and possibilities of a reality that does not yet exist. To do so would be to reproduce, within theory, the very onoptic thinking we criticise.

The task of theory is not to design the coming regime, nor to offer a complete programme of deliverance. Its task is to show how the present Power was constructed, how it infiltrated the institutions, and how it closes possibilities in advance.

Theory points to the serpent; it does not prescribe in advance the common life to be built once the serpent has been seen.

Final Declaration

Power was not one throughout history.

It became one.

That unification settled with the institutions of 1945, gained ascendancy with the dissolution of counter-equivalence, and reached the single person through synchronous digital networks.

The Onopticon was not content to silence society. It divided it into population, user, profile and risk. It prevented people from seeing that they faced the same thing. It presented the state as the source of decision; it used legal validity in the place of legitimacy.

Governments changed. The names of regimes changed. Hegemons, flags, currencies and techniques of rule changed.

But because each changed government was obliged to rule within the same financial, legal, technological and security infrastructures, societies did not become the subjects of their own fates. Conditions of life improved or worsened; but the subject that set the limits of that improvement and worsening was never society.

This is the answer to our opening question:

Governments change; but the Power that determines the reality within which any government may rule does not.

America may take Britain's place, and China America's. That a past domination proves more bearable than a new one does not make it freedom. To be better governed is not to have governed oneself.

In democratic and autocratic interfaces the rope may be longer or shorter; the tether visible or concealed. But the length of the rope, and the question of who holds it, are not the same question.

Legitimacy does not belong to Power.

Legitimacy belongs to society.

When the population recognises its common adversary, when recognition reaches critical quantity, and when society refuses the source of the authority used in its name, the fundamental circuit of the Onopticon begins to break. History has shown that the withdrawal of legitimacy can dissolve an order even whilst the apparatus of coercion stands in place; the question of our age is whether that mechanism can be worked under conditions without an outside.

Society need not found a new Power. Society need not resemble Power. Its task is not to seize the centre of domination, but to end the use, by domination, of a legitimacy that is its own.

Power can use force. It can produce obedience. It can suppress bodies. It can labour to fragment common recognition.

But it cannot create legitimacy.

And so our final judgement is this:

Power is historically unified imposition and domination. The Reality Paradigm is its logic, which structures the field of possibility in advance. The Onopticon is the contemporary whole that operates this logic through synchronous digital networks. The state is its visible interface; the hegemon, its provisional centre of concentration; the regime, its technique of domination fitted to the social body; the population, its singularised object of rule; and society — when common recognition reaches critical quantity — the essential adversary that takes back the legitimacy that is its own. De-onopticism is not the founding of another Power; it is society's recognition of the domination that has infiltrated its institutions, the severing of the onoptic connections, and the taking back of its common life.

