

The New Grey Power

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In 1941, Aldous Huxley published *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics*. It was the biography of François Leclerc du Tremblay. This French Capuchin friar was also known as *l'éminence grise* because of a robe he used to wear and because, although he was not a cardinal, he was as influential as one, in his role as advisor to His Eminence the Cardinal de Richelieu. Twice removed from the official source of power—Richelieu was in his turn King Louis XIII's chief minister—du Tremblay profoundly shaped French and European politics and the course of the Thirty Years' War. This was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in European history, World War Zero really. It is such an ability to control events and people's behaviour by influencing the influencers, behind the scenes, that I have in mind when coining the expression "grey power".

There is grey power in every society, and the two change together, as concauses. The whole process may sometimes be dramatic, even revolutionary, but it is never linear or regularly paced. Think of how European societies and their grey powers slowly changed because of the complex interactions between mercantilism, colonialism and the emergence of the so-called Westphalian system of sovereign states. Or how quickly the USA was transformed during the Gilded Age, from 1870s to about 1900, and the grey power exercised during that time by wealthy industrialists and financiers such as Andrew Carnegie, Andrew W. Mellon, J. P. Morgan or John D. Rockefeller. Changes in society and in grey power within it do not follow a domino-effect pattern; they are more like a complicated waltz in history's ballroom, where society and grey power dance together, sometimes revisiting some corners, moving at varied pace and alternating between who leads whom.

This long premise is needed to clarify that asking how grey power has evolved in order to adapt to our current societies is both a pressing question and a potential trap. It is pressing because grey power is not the same within mature information societies as it is in industrial, mass-media or ecclesiocratic ones. Unless we gain a better understanding of how the nature and exercise of grey power—in short, its morphology—has

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altered, we shall find developing a better society more challenging than it should be. We need to know that which we want to improve. A scholarly history of grey power would be a very interesting reading. Yet the question may become a trap if we are not wary of superficial simplifications. Recall that grey power is like ivy: it grows on the wall of official power and flourishes in full shade. At a time of great societal transformations and widespread conflicts, it is tempting to single out some headline-grabbing news as the factor driving the transformations in the morphology of grey power today. Immigration and terrorism, globalisation and the financial markets, the housing bubble and the reform of the banking system, inflation and deflation, hacktivism and slacktivism, cyberwar and the Second Cold War, the Euro and the European Union, multinationals and American cultural colonialism, the Arab Spring and Colour Revolutions, China's GDP and the Greek crisis... the list is long but it may be distracting because it focuses on contingent historical phenomena that fail to identify the deeper shift in the means through which events and people's behaviour are controlled or influenced, and hence are primed and prompted to relate with such historical phenomena within mature information societies. Using a different analogy, these are the waves on history's surface. No matter how gigantic and even threatening, we need to focus on the underling currents that will still be there when the storm is over. We need to dive deeper, if we wish to understand the new morphology of grey power. So let me take the plunge.

We saw at the beginning of this article that, when Christianity dominated Europe, grey power was a religious business exercised through the creation and control of faith. In industrial societies, grey power is exercised through the creation and control of things. To be more precise, events and people's behaviour can be manipulated not only through force, ownership of land and monopoly on faith but also, and then mainly, through the control of the means of production of goods and services and the corresponding management of wealth or capital. The "grey" worn by the new eminences influencing the influencers is that of their business suits.

In the long run, capitalism, competition and consumerism are bound to erode the industrial-financial grey power through the transformation of goods and services into commodities, that is, undifferentiated marketable items, which become so generic as to erase any perceivable difference in value between brands or versions. At some point, manufacturing no longer guarantees a place behind the throne; it rather kneels in front of it. Thus, the decline of the industrial-financial grey power began a long time ago, but reached its symbolic climax in 2009, when General Motors and Chrysler were faced with bankruptcy and liquidation and hence granted a bailout by the USA and Canadian governments worth \$85 billion.

In the meanwhile, another grey power had emerged, based on the control of the means of production no longer of things, but of information about things. As Orwell famously writes twice in *1984*, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past". Recall that there are no computers or digital technologies in *1984*, which is rather a dystopian description of a totalitarian mass-media society. In it, those who control (the means of production of) information can control and influence people's behaviour and events. Information has always been power, even at the time of Richelieu, but it is only with the growth of the mass-media industry, the rise of intellectuals and a techno-scientific intelligentsia, the development of propaganda and advertisement and the emergence of the press and of journalism as a

so-called “Fourth Estate” that grey power becomes significantly informational. If a day needs to be identified for its full emergence, this may be August 8, 1974, when Nixon resigned because of the Watergate scandal, brought to light by *The Washington Post’s* investigative journalism.

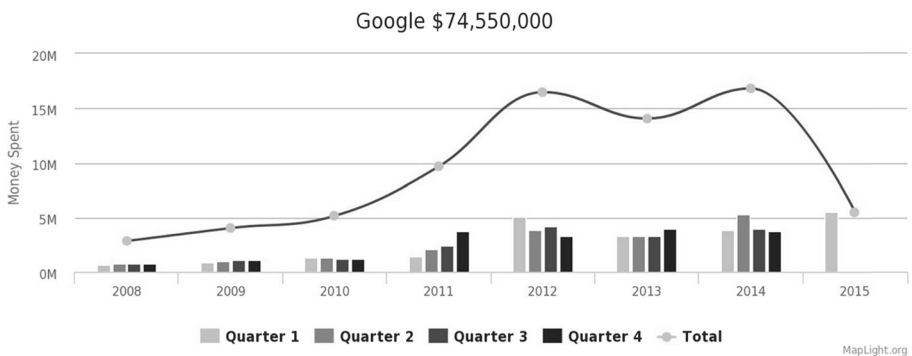
Some experts seem to think that this is still the context in which we find ourselves. They may speak of the knowledge industry or of the Internet replacing wealth or capital as a source of power. Perhaps, but this would be a dangerous mistake if applied to the interpretation of *grey* power. For it is anchored to an anachronistic view of the information society as a mass-media society, and hence focuses on visible aspects of *socio-political* power—the blogging or tweeting community, the networked individuals, the citizen journalists, the hacktivists, etc.—not on what lies behind it. The risk is mistaking who sits on the throne for who has joined the powers behind it. If information and the means for its production were the new grey power, then newspapers would not be under threat, journalism would not be a profession in crisis, publishers, bookshops and libraries would not be closing down. Wikipedia would be more powerful than Facebook or Twitter. Publishers would be dictating their terms to Amazon. The music industry would have revolutionised Apple. Hollywood would influence Netflix. Newspapers would have imposed their will on Yahoo! or Google.

To understand who are today’s new grey eminences, we need to realise that information is a matter of both *questions* and *answers*. The informational grey power that was at work in the mass-media society was the power of those who controlled the means of production of *answers*. Consider that publishing or broadcasting, like advertising, means sending answers to receivers who may not have asked any question: it happens even if nobody is reading or listening. But, today, in mature information societies, the transformation of information into another commodity means that answers are dirt cheap. Their control confers no grey power, which has shifted further behind the scenes, moving from the control over information about things, to the control over the questions generating information about things. In this case, if I were to choose a date for the coming of age of such a new grey power, it would be September 4, 2014, the day when the White House announced that it had named Megan Smith, a Google executive, as its next Chief Technology Officer (CTO), and Alexander Macgillivray, a lawyer who had joined Twitter in 2009, after 8 years at Google as primary attorney, as its deputy CTO. It is indicative that *The Washington Post* was purchased in 2013 by Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon.

The new emerging grey power is exercised about which questions can be asked, when and where, how and by whom and hence what answers can be received in principle. And since a question without an answer is just another definition of uncertainty, one may summarise all this by saying that, in mature information societies, the morphology of grey power is the morphology of uncertainty. Who controls the questions controls the answers. Who controls the answers controls reality.

Issues such as transparency, privacy, freedom of speech and intellectual property rights all belong to a more fundamental debate on the new morphology of grey power. The controversy surrounding an experiment in 2014 in which Facebook manipulated the balance of positive and negative messages seen by 689,000 Facebook users without

their knowledge or consent showed how deeply influential Facebook’s grey power may be (Facebook is basically an interface managing the question-and-answer flow of social information). And the debate, also in 2014, on the so-called “right to be forgotten” was also a debate on whether European socio-political power may regain control over Google’s grey power, which enjoys a virtual monopoly on how Europeans find information online (disclosure: the author is a member of *Google Advisory Council on the Right to be Forgotten*). Nor is Google less present at home. According to the government transparency group MapLight (<http://maplight.org/content/chamber-and-google-among-top-lobbying-spenders-in-first-quarter-of-2015>), during the first quarter of 2015 Google became, for the first time, the company that spends the most money on lobbying the US federal government, surpassing defence contractors like Lockheed Martin or energy firms like Exxon Mobil Corp.



MapLight analysis of how much Google has spent lobbying US Congress and federal agencies (data source: Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives). Since 2008, Google spent a total of \$74,550,000. During the first quarter of 2015, it spent \$5,470,000, the most it has ever spent in one quarter.

If the previous diagnosis is mostly correct, two tasks lie ahead. One is prognostic: we need to understand better the nature and likely development of the new grey power that is emerging, as a form of control over uncertainty. The new grey power is clearly more akin to the old ecclesiocratic power than to the grey power of mass-media, which is actually cannibalising. And like the industrial grey power, it tends to subordinate politics to economics. But we should resist the temptation of considering just another case of “business as usual”. In part, this is exactly the narrative quietly promoted by the new grey power itself. The other task is therapeutic: we need to understand what can be done to ensure that control over the morphology of uncertainty is exercised in a benign way, kept in check by legitimate socio-legal and political powers and not replaced by worse kinds of grey power. These are long and tiring tasks, so we had better make a start.¹

¹ This editor letter is a revised version of an article published by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on July 10 2015, with the title “Die neue graue Macht” <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/gastkommentar-die-neue-graue-macht-1.2559908>.

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