Network Theory circa 1800: Charles Brockden Brown’s Arthur Mervyn

STACEY MARGOLIS

Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city’s wealth of public life may grow.

—Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Social networks are old; network theory is new. At least this is what we’ve been told in countless recent books that link the emergence of network theory to the rise of the digital age. Instant and global electronic connections not only have transformed our ability to form and manage groups, create new social ties, and foment political change but, these theorists maintain, have fostered a new interest in figuring out exactly how such networks function. According to Duncan J. Watts, who helped launch modern network theory with a 1998 essay on the “small world” problem, “the science of networks” emerged in response to a newfound sense of global connection: “Surprised by the meteoric rise of the Internet, stung by a series of financial crises from Asia to Latin America, and stunned by ethnic violence and terrorism from Africa to New York, the world has learned the hard way that it is connected in a manner few people had anticipated and no one understood.” This “new science” of networks, in taking on the “world of people, friendships, rumors, disease, fads, firms, and financial crises[,] . . . speaks directly to the momentous events going on around it” (13).

No one would deny that the world has been transformed by digital technology. But there is something both implausible and unsatisfying in this depiction of a world just now waking up to the prevalence (and power) of social networks. Watts himself acknowledges that global financial crises (not to mention diseases, fads, and rumors) are nothing new. As Robert Darnton argues about the Old Regime in France, a pre-digital society is nonetheless an “information society.” Indeed, part of Darnton’s point in describing eighteenth-century Paris in these terms is to overturn our familiar and comfortable (but entirely inaccurate) sense of the world before the twentieth-century telecommunications revolution. We cannot help but think of the Old Regime, he writes, “as a simple, tranquil, media-free world-we-have-lost, a society with no telephones, no television, no e-mail, Internet, and all the rest.” And yet, Darnton claims, despite the Old Regime’s lack of modern technology, “it had a dense communication network” that was as complicated

1 Recent books that link the study of network societies to the rise of digital information technology include David Easley and Jon Kleinberg; Manuel Castells; Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler; Clay Shirky; Yochai Benkler; Albert-Laszlo Barabasi; and Mark Buchanan.
and sophisticated to its participants as ours is to us (7). If the idea of pre-digital innocence is simply a myth, can it really be the case that it is only at the turn of the twenty-first century that anyone bothered to investigate the hidden, widespread, and unexpected connections that make an information society possible?

This essay argues that the answer to this question is no, and it will, by way of illustration, examine in some detail a novel that attempts to theorize the information networks of the early American republic. Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* is at once an example and an analysis of the rise of an early information society that is, in its sense of disorienting transformation, much like our own. One could without too much trouble adapt Watts’s formulation for our current “connected age” to Brown’s post-Revolutionary moment: surprised by the meteoric rise of the newspaper, stung by a series of financial panics from England to the West Indies, and stunned by the violence of revolutions from France to Haiti, Americans learned the hard way that they were connected in a manner few people had anticipated and no one understood. Brown’s novel both imagines a world threatened by revolution and reckless financial speculation and recognizes how little anyone understood the hidden ties that made a decision in one place wreak havoc in another. His desire to understand the hidden connections engendered by a modern urban center like post-Revolutionary Philadelphia is, I would argue, remarkably similar to Watts’s desire to anatomize a “period in the world’s history . . . that is more highly, more globally, and more unexpectedly connected than at any time before it” (14).

Brown’s own attempt to comprehend the logic of these connections depends less on models of political and financial crisis than on the mysterious spread of disease. While critics of *Arthur Mervyn* have invariably read yellow fever in terms of its horrifying symptoms, what Brown seems to find most compelling about the disease is how it circulates. Although an epidemic is, according to Arthur, characterized by dangers “mysterious and unseen” (165), the disease itself is unmistak-

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2 Matt Cohen’s work on colonial America follows Darnton’s logic, arguing that communication among European colonists and Native Americans depended on complex and sophisticated information networks, which encompassed not only written texts but speech and performance.

3 According to David Paul Nord, “The Revolution and its aftermath left Philadelphia with a heightened taste for newspaper reading. By 1794 the city had eight newspapers, four of them dailies. . . . These newspapers carried at least ten times as much material as had the city’s two weeklies in 1764” (202).

4 The Panic of 1797, sparked by the suspension of specie payment by the Bank of England, had disastrous effects on the American economy and, eventually, on trade with the West Indies. For an excellent account, see Richard S. Chew.

5 Critics tend to read the epidemic as either an allegory of post-Revolutionary politics or of financial corruption. The former position is articulated most clearly in Robert Levine. For political readings that stress race and empire, see Sean Goudie, Bill Christopherson, and Andy Doolen 75–110. The latter position is articulated most clearly in James H. Justus. See also Caroll Smith-Rosenberg; Steven Watts; Carl Ostrowski; and Teresa A. Goddu 31–51. In all of these readings, the fever is imagined in terms of its harmfulness rather than its function. One important exception is an essay by Sian Silyn Roberts, who reads the epidemic as a way of exemplifying the dissolution of individual boundaries in an emergent cosmopolitan society.