

A Theory of Power Convergence: The Cumulative Individual

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Abstract

This article develops a theory of *power convergence* centered on the *cumulative individual*. Existing theories illuminate distinct dimensions of authority—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, networked—but how they converge within a single actor remains underdeveloped. The article argues that these domains increasingly converge within individual actors, accelerated though not first made possible by contemporary mediation and connectivity, so that such actors function as systems of power. Power accumulates through recursive feedback among performance, amplification, affect, and institutional response. Distinguishing this configuration from Clegg's circuits, Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy, and Bourdieu's conversion of capital, the article formalizes it as a systems model—personal, systemic, and inherently volatile.

Keywords

power convergence; cumulative individual; theories of power; authority; social and political philosophy; structural power; symbolic power; networked power; recursion; feedback; mediatization; Clegg; Bourdieu; Hayward

Author's Note

This article is the first paper in a broader research program on power convergence. It introduces the core theoretical framework and the concept of the cumulative individual. A second paper, *A Theory of Power Convergence: Epstein, Assange, and Ye as Cumulative Individuals* (2026), applies the framework to three contemporary cases (<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6443638>). A third paper, *A Theory of Power Convergence: From Cumulative Individual to Recursive Sovereign* (2026), extends the framework into the domain of sovereignty by introducing the concepts of recursive sovereignty and the recursive sovereign (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20803099>). The present article is written to stand on its own, but it also establishes the conceptual foundation for the series that follows.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Fragmented Power

The study of power is unusually rich in accounts of its distinct dimensions—coercion, structure, symbolism, affect, networks—yet comparatively thin on how those dimensions combine within a single actor. Despite a century of sophisticated theorization, and despite important attempts to theorize power as an interacting system, the convergence of multiple domains around one individual remains underdeveloped. Each of these perspectives captures an important dimension of authority, but none adequately explains how power operates when these domains converge within the same actor. As a result, contemporary forms of authority—especially those centered on individuals—are often analyzed piecemeal, with explanatory frameworks that illuminate particular mechanisms while obscuring their interaction.

This fragmentation is not merely a matter of theoretical preference; it has substantive consequences for how power is understood. Accounts that privilege coercion, from Hobbes and Weber to Arendt, illuminate the logic of force and sanction but tend to treat as secondary the symbolic and psychological dynamics that make force legitimate or effective. Structural theories, whether Marxist, Strange's account of structural power, or Lukes's analysis of preference-shaping, explain how rules and resources constrain behavior but struggle to accommodate visibility, performance, and affect. Bourdieusian and interpretive analyses of symbolic power capture meaning-making but often treat material and institutional capacities as background conditions rather than active components of authority. Network and systems theories, from Castells to Luhmann, reveal patterns of connection, amplification, and self-reproduction yet frequently bracket the question of how influence stabilizes, hardens, or translates into durable power held by particular actors. Each tradition is powerful within its own domain, but none was designed to address the case in which several domains operate together within one actor.

What is missing from these accounts is a framework capable of explaining convergence: the process by which multiple domains of power accumulate, reinforce one another, and stabilize within particular actors. The argument developed below builds this framework not by setting these traditions aside but by working through them—taking from each the mechanism it theorizes best and specifying how, under contemporary conditions, those mechanisms interact. contemporary power increasingly operates through the interdependence of several modalities rather than any single one. Coercive capacity is amplified by symbolic legitimacy; structural leverage is intensified by networked visibility; psychological attachment transforms attention into endurance. When these domains interact recursively, power ceases to be merely situational or role-bound and instead becomes system-like, embedded in the actor who carries it.

This paper advances the claim that, under contemporary conditions, power increasingly accumulates and converges in individuals who function as systems rather than as discrete actors within preexisting structures. These figures do not simply wield power across different domains; they integrate them, generating feedback loops that stabilize authority while also rendering it volatile. To

capture this phenomenon, I introduce the concept of the Cumulative Individual: an actor in whom multiple domains of power—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked—are simultaneously present and recursively reinforcing.

The concept of the cumulative individual is not offered as a metaphor or a descriptive label, but as an analytical construct intended to explain a structural shift in how power is organized and experienced. By focusing on convergence rather than isolation, this framework seeks to move beyond fragmented theories of power and toward a model capable of accounting for the density, dynamism, and instability of authority in contemporary social life.

2. Why Existing Syntheses Are Not Yet Enough

The claim that the convergence of power domains is underdeveloped invites an immediate objection: the interaction of multiple forms of power has already been theorized, and theorized well. Several frameworks have explicitly rejected the additive, single-modality picture this paper also rejects, and any account of convergence must show what it adds to them. Four are especially pressing, because each anticipates part of the argument advanced here. Stating what each established and where it stops is the clearest way to specify the contribution that remains.

The most direct precursor is Stewart Clegg's *circuits of power*. Clegg models power as flowing through three interacting circuits—the *episodic* (the agency level of day-to-day interaction), the *dispositional* (rules, meanings, and the social integration that legitimates authority), and the *facilitative* (technology, environmental contingency, and system integration)—which reconstitute one another at *obligatory passage points*, the nodal channels through which power must pass (Clegg 1989). This is an explicitly interactive, multi-level, feedback-sensitive theory of power, and it forecloses any claim that the interaction of power's forms has gone unexamined. But Clegg's circuits are a model of how power circulates and is fixed *through an organizational and social field*; the passage points are positions in a network, and the theory's question is how power is stabilized and contested across a system. It is, in the vocabulary of this paper, a circulation theory of unusual sophistication—and for that reason it shares the limit identified earlier in Foucault: it theorizes distribution and flow, not condensation. What it does not ask is what happens when the circuits do not merely pass through a node but settle on one, when a single actor becomes the obligatory passage point for several circuits at once and binds them through recursive feedback rather than routing them onward. Convergence begins exactly where Clegg's circulation comes to rest.

A second framework that must be addressed is Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of *compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive* power, generated from two dimensions—whether power works through interaction or constitution, and whether its effects are direct or diffuse (Barnett and Duvall 2005). Theirs is among the most influential synthetic typologies in the literature, and they explicitly urge scholars to see the four forms as connected rather than competing. But the connection they call for is analytical: they ask the reader to hold multiple concepts of power in view

simultaneously when explaining an outcome, so that no single form crowds out the others. This is a taxonomy for *sorting* power's forms and ensuring none is neglected; it is not a theory of how those forms dynamically reinforce one another within a single actor over time. Barnett and Duvall give the analyst a more complete inventory; convergence specifies a mechanism—recursive cross-domain amplification—by which entries in that inventory cease to be analytically separable because each is producing the others.

Bourdieu's account of the *forms of capital* poses the sharpest version of the objection, because it is already a theory of accumulation and cross-form transformation. Economic, cultural, and social capital are convertible into one another, at a cost in "transformation work" and with characteristic losses, and these conversions are the basis of strategies for reproducing position (Bourdieu 1986). Convertibility is genuinely close to what this paper means by interoperability, and the debt is real. But conversion and convergence are different relations. Conversion is sequential and substitutive: capital of one type is exchanged, at a price, for capital of another, much as currency is changed. Convergence is simultaneous and compounding: domains are jointly activated such that a gain in one *raises the yield* of the others at the same time, in a feedback loop that has no analogue in the conversion model. Bourdieu also theorizes accumulation as the slow, intergenerational reproduction of advantage; he does not theorize the rapid, recursive, and—crucially—*volatile* accumulation that tight coupling produces, in which the same interconnection that compounds power also transmits collapse. Convertibility without recursion and volatility is the static skeleton of which convergence is the dynamic body.

The most fundamental challenge comes from a different direction. Clarissa Hayward's *de-facing* of power argues that the entire actor-centered picture is mistaken: power is not an instrument that identifiable agents possess and use, but a network of social boundaries—laws, norms, identities, institutional arrangements—that delimit fields of possible action for the powerful and powerless alike (Hayward 1998, 2000). If Hayward is right, then "the cumulative individual" commits the precise error she diagnoses—attributing to a person what is in fact a property of impersonal boundaries. This objection must be met directly rather than absorbed, because it denies the paper's central object. The response is to grant Hayward's claim about the *constitution* of power while denying that it settles the question of its *concentration*. Hayward is correct that the domains an individual converges—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, networked—are not invented by that individual; they are boundary-effects with social histories, and the cumulative individual no more authors them than a financier authors capital. But the framework's claim is not that such an actor creates these domains. It is that, under specifiable conditions, the domains become jointly activated and recursively bound *around a particular actor*, who thereby becomes the site at which otherwise impersonal boundaries are integrated into a single self-reinforcing system. De-faced power can still condense; boundaries that no one authored can still come to run through, and be coordinated by, one node. The cumulative individual is not power wearing a face, in Hayward's sense, but impersonal boundaries acquiring, contingently and unstably, a center of gravity. That an actor is the site of convergence does not entail that the actor is the source of power—and keeping that

distinction sharp is what allows the framework to accept Hayward's ontology while still theorizing individual-level condensation.

Taken together, these four frameworks establish that the interaction of power's forms is not virgin territory, and that the contribution claimed here is correspondingly narrow and specific. It is not the discovery that power has multiple interacting dimensions—Clegg, Barnett and Duvall, Bourdieu, and others established that. It is the specification of a particular configuration those frameworks leave underdeveloped: the *simultaneous, recursive, and volatile* binding of multiple domains around a single actor, distinct from Clegg's circulation, Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy, Bourdieu's sequential conversion, and irreducible to Hayward's boundaries even as it presupposes them. The remainder of the paper develops that configuration and its consequences.

3. From Fragmentation to Accumulation

The fragmentation of power theory reflects a deeper analytical habit: the tendency to treat domains of power as discrete, additive, or substitutable. Coercion, structure, symbolism, affect, and networks are frequently theorized as separate channels through which influence flows, each governed by its own logic and largely independent of the others. Even when multiple domains are acknowledged, they are often juxtaposed rather than integrated, producing layered accounts of power that remain analytically segmented (Lukes 2005; Foucault 1977; Bourdieu 1991).

This segmentation obscures a crucial dynamic of contemporary authority. Power domains do not merely coexist; they interact. More precisely, they mutually reinforce one another. Symbolic recognition can amplify structural leverage by attracting resources and access; networked visibility can intensify psychological attachment, converting attention into loyalty; coercive capacity, when symbolically framed, can stabilize legitimacy rather than erode it (Castells 2009; Papacharissi 2015; Massumi 1995). In such configurations, power cannot be understood as the sum of independent parts. Its effects emerge from the feedback loops that bind domains together.

The most influential alternative to a domain-additive picture already rejects the idea that power is a possession held in discrete amounts. In Foucault's account, power is not localized in institutions or persons but circulates: it is exercised rather than held, relational rather than substantial, distributed through capillary relations that run throughout the social body rather than emanating from a sovereign center (Foucault 1977, 1978). This is a decisive advance over additive models, and the present account inherits its relational premise.

But circulation is theorized as fundamentally dispersive. Power moves, diffuses, and is everywhere precisely because it is nowhere in particular; where it appears to concentrate, that concentration is read as an effect of relations passing through a point rather than as a durable property of the point itself (Foucault 1978; Luhmann 1995). What this emphasis under-theorizes is condensation: the conditions under which circulating power develops stable attractors—actors around whom flows do

not merely pass but gather, settle, and compound. The claim here is not that circulation is wrong; it is that circulation is incomplete. Under contemporary conditions of mediation and connectivity—and, more weakly, under earlier conditions as well—circulation produces nodes at which power ceases to disperse and begins to accumulate. The analytical task is to specify those nodes and the dynamics that stabilize them.

One body of theory does treat power as something that crystallizes rather than merely circulates. Michael Mann's account of the sources of social power locates the genesis of durable authority in organizational reach: power consolidates when overlapping ideological, economic, military, and political networks are bound together through organizations that extend across social space, allowing some actors to harness several networks at once (Mann 1986). This is the closest existing analogue to the dynamic theorized here, and the comparison is worth drawing out, because it clarifies as much by its differences as by its similarities. The notion of accumulation developed below shares Mann's intuition that power becomes durable through the integration of heterogeneous sources rather than the dominance of any one.

It departs from him on the site and mechanism of integration. For Mann, the integrating agent is organizational and collective; power crystallizes in and through institutions that outlast the individuals who staff them. The argument here is that under conditions of mediatization, the integrating function can be performed by a single actor, and that integration proceeds not primarily through organizational extension but through recursive feedback among domains converging on that actor. The cumulative individual is therefore not Mann's networks relocated to a person. It is a distinct configuration in which the work of binding heterogeneous sources of power, which Mann assigns to durable organizations, is instead accomplished within and around an individual, and accomplished both more rapidly and more precariously than organizations manage it.

Recast in these terms, accumulation implies three linked processes. First, power condenses: capacities that are often distributed across institutions or roles become concentrated in particular individuals. Second, it stabilizes: repeated activation across domains produces durability, allowing authority to persist beyond isolated events or contexts. Third, it feeds back: gains in one domain increase the likelihood of gains in others, creating recursive reinforcement rather than linear causation (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Grewal 2008). These processes are what distinguish accumulation from circulation. Circulation can produce all three transiently, as power passes through a position; accumulation names the condition in which they become self-sustaining.

These feedback dynamics are especially pronounced in environments characterized by mediatization and digital connectivity. Visibility draws amplification, which attracts resources, which in turn fund further performance and enforcement. The result is a self-reinforcing configuration in which power becomes increasingly dense, anchored less in formal position than in the actor's capacity to integrate domains of influence (Castells 2009; Zuboff 2019).

It is important to state precisely what role these contemporary conditions play. Mediatization, digital connectivity, and recursive amplification are accelerants of convergence, not preconditions of it. They increase the speed at which gains in one domain propagate to others, widen the scale over which a single actor can sustain visibility and reach, and lower the cost of the feedback that binds domains together. What they do not do is bring the underlying mechanism into being. Convergence is a general dynamic of how power can condense within an actor whenever multiple domains are jointly activated and made to reinforce one another; it long predates digital media and can consolidate substantially outside them, through private networks, financial leverage, institutional position, and interpersonal coercion. The digital environment is therefore best understood as the most powerful amplifier convergence has yet encountered rather than the condition that makes it possible. This distinction matters for the cases examined in this series: some cumulative individuals are native to the digital environment and unintelligible without it, while others assemble convergent power largely through pre- or non-digital means and are accelerated by mediation only at the margins. A framework that treated digital mediation as constitutive could not accommodate the latter; one that treats it as an accelerant accommodates both.

Recognizing accumulation as a core dynamic clarifies why convergence is theoretically necessary rather than optional. Without a concept of accumulation, power appears episodic, situational, or endlessly dispersed. With it, power can be understood as systemic at the level of the individual.¹ This shift—from circulation to accumulation—provides the conceptual bridge to the central construct of this paper: the cumulative individual, whose authority emerges not from any single domain, but from the convergence and recursive reinforcement of several.

4. The Developmental Logic of Power

To formalize the move from fragmentation to convergence, this paper introduces a geometric model of power development. The purpose of this geometry is analytical rather than illustrative: it provides a way to conceptualize how authority is organized, stabilized, and transformed as different domains of power are integrated. Rather than tracing a linear historical sequence, the model specifies a developmental logic—a set of structural configurations through which power can be organized, recombined, and re-centered under different conditions. Each configuration is distinguished by a single analytical variable: the degree to which authority is differentiated from the person who holds it. The sequence runs from authority fused with a singular presence to authority distributed across impersonal systems—and then, with the pentagram (the five-domain convergence model), to a configuration that recombines distributed capacities without restoring the original fusion.

¹ This formulation does not presuppose methodological individualism, nor does it deny the continued importance of institutions in structuring power. The analytic focus on individuals follows from the requirements of convergence itself. Convergent power depends on recursive feedback, affective integration, and unified visibility across heterogeneous domains—conditions that institutions, by design, tend to distribute, buffer, and fragment. Institutions mediate, stabilize, and constrain power; convergence requires condensation. Under contemporary conditions, individuals are the primary entities capable of integrating multiple power domains into a single recursive system.

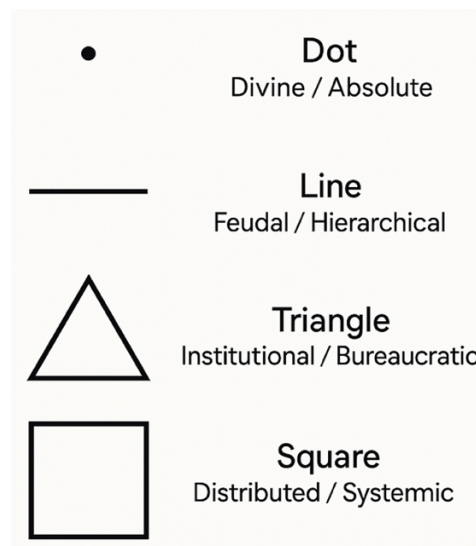


Figure 1. Developmental Geometry of Power Organization

Figure 1 presents a developmental logic of power organization rather than a historical sequence. Authority is shown evolving from singular concentration (dot), to directional command (line), to mediated hierarchy (triangle), and to distributed systemic arrangements (square). Each form represents an increase in organizational dimensionality and complexity. The figure does not imply linear determinism or replacement; earlier forms may coexist with later ones. Instead, it specifies how authority becomes progressively mediated, abstracted, and decentered from singular actors as complexity increases.

Dot: Singular Authority

The dot represents power organized as indivisible presence—authority that has not yet been differentiated from the body that bears it. This is the configuration Kantorowicz reconstructs in the medieval doctrine of the king's two bodies, where the problem of succession exposes a basic limit of singular authority, which is that it cannot by itself outlast the person who holds it. The doctrine's elaborate distinction between the king's natural body and his body politic is best read as the first machinery for detaching authority from embodiment—an admission, internal to the singular form, that undifferentiated power is mortal and therefore unstable (Kantorowicz 1957). Schmitt's account of sovereignty as the capacity to decide the exception describes the same configuration from the inside: authority that grounds the legal order without being grounded by it, legitimacy that is self-justifying because it precedes the very norms that would otherwise justify it (Schmitt 1985). What both capture, and what the dot names, is authority at zero differentiation: unitary, immediate, anchored in presence rather than procedure, and—for exactly that reason—unable to reproduce itself without importing the differentiation the later forms supply.

Line: Command

The line introduces directionality, and with it the first form of differentiation: authority begins to separate from the person by extending through others. Power is transmitted along a chain in which command flows from superior to subordinate, producing ordered relations of obedience. Weber's analysis of traditional and patrimonial domination specifies the mechanism. Authority here is still personal—the subordinate obeys a master, not an office—but it is no longer indivisible, because it

now depends on a graded series of loyal intermediaries who relay it outward (Weber 1978). The legitimacy that sustains the chain is correspondingly personal: obedience rests on fidelity to the ruler and to the sanctity of inherited position, not on impersonal rule (Beetham 1991). The line therefore captures power as relational but not yet systematized—differentiated enough to travel beyond a single body, but still tethered to persons at every link, and still vulnerable wherever a link's loyalty fails.

Triangle: Bureaucracy

The triangle represents the decisive break: authority detaches from persons and lodges in offices. Weber's account of rational-legal domination is the engine of this move. What stabilizes bureaucratic authority is the separation of the office from its incumbent—rules that apply regardless of who occupies the position, jurisdictions defined in advance, legitimacy that flows from legality rather than loyalty (Weber 1978). The configuration is triangular because impersonal authority requires at least three mutually supporting supports that no single person can collapse into themselves: a body of rules, an administrative apparatus that applies them, and an enforcement capacity that backs them. Each constrains the others, and legitimacy is generated by their conformity to shared procedure rather than by any actor's presence (Beetham 1991). This is what allows authority to survive the death or removal of any incumbent: power has been differentiated from personhood to the point of institutional memory. Authority becomes durable, predictable, and impersonal—and, by the same motion, more mediated and more complex than anything the line could sustain.

Square: Systemic Distribution

The square pushes differentiation past hierarchy itself. Authority is no longer transmitted from an apex but distributed across multiple systems—markets, legal regimes, media, parties, administrative organizations—that interact without a single commanding center. Power becomes modular: it operates through interdependence rather than command, and outcomes emerge from the interaction of semi-autonomous spheres rather than from directives issued at a top (Keohane and Nye 1977; Luhmann 1995). This is the organizational world Mann describes, in which social power is generated by overlapping networks no one of which governs the others, and durable authority is a matter of binding several of them together rather than commanding any one (Mann 1986). At the square, authority is maximally differentiated from the person: it inheres in the relations among systems, and individuals figure as occupants of positions within them. The square represents a high-complexity distribution of authority, not its terminal form.

At this point the geometry reaches the limit of a single variable. The progression from dot to square tracks one thing: the increasing differentiation of authority from the person, measured as organizational complexity. But complexity is not the only thing that varies across these forms, and the next configuration cannot be reached by adding another increment of it. What the pentagram introduces is a change of register. The dot-to-square sequence asks *how differentiated* authority is from persons; the pentagram asks *which domains of power* are active and whether they are converging. These are different questions, and the shift between them is deliberate. The earlier forms describe the architecture within which power is distributed; the pentagram describes what happens

when the distinct domains of power that those architectures kept partitioned begin to re-integrate within a single actor. The five points are therefore not a fifth step in a complexity sequence. They mark the moment the analysis turns from the *shape* of authority's distribution to the *substance* of what is being distributed—and to the conditions under which distribution reverses into convergence.

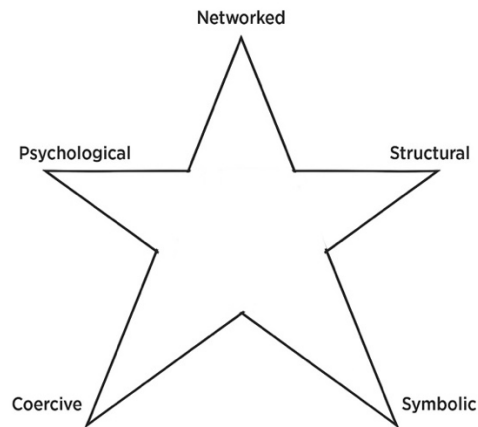


Figure 2. The Pentagram of Power Convergence

Figure 2 depicts the convergence of five distinct domains of power—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked—within a single actor. The pentagram (the five-domain convergence model) represents integration rather than hierarchy: no domain is primary, and activation in any one can propagate across the others. The figure models convergence as a structural condition in which multiple domains are jointly activated and mutually reinforcing, preparing the ground for recursive dynamics analyzed in later sections.

Pentagram: Convergence

The pentagram marks a reconfiguration rather than a return. Where the square distributes power across systems, the pentagram recombines those system-level capacities within individuals. This is why it cannot be read as a regression along the differentiation axis. The dot was authority *undifferentiated* from the person; the pentagram is authority *re-fused* with a person after differentiation has already done its work—a fusion that presupposes the very systems the square distributed, and would be impossible without them. The singular authority of the dot has nothing behind it but presence; the convergent authority of the pentagram has the differentiated capacities of markets, media, bureaucracies, and networks behind it, now drawn back together around an actor who activates them in combination.

Under conditions of mediatization, digital connectivity, and recursive amplification, power that was previously distributed across systems begins to re-condense within individuals. The five points of the pentagram correspond to the domains of power identified in this framework—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked. Authority emerges not from any single domain, but from their convergence and mutual reinforcement within a single actor.

Crucially, this configuration does not represent a reversal to singular authority. Unlike the dot, convergent power is not ontological or given; it is produced and sustained through feedback loops.

Visibility amplifies influence; influence attracts resources; resources enable enforcement; enforcement reinforces symbolic legitimacy. The individual becomes a node of systemic power, integrating capacities that were previously dispersed across institutions and systems.

This geometric sequence should not be read as historical determinism. Societies do not move cleanly or irreversibly from one form to another, nor does the emergence of convergence erase earlier configurations. Lines, triangles, and squares persist. What the model captures is a developmental logic of organization: the ways in which authority can be structured, recombined, and re-centered as conditions change. The pentagram identifies a configuration that has become increasingly salient under contemporary conditions, where power accumulates through convergence rather than remaining institutionally partitioned. By formalizing this logic, the geometric model clarifies what existing theories struggle to explain: how authority can be simultaneously personal and systemic, distributed and condensed, durable and volatile. It is this configuration—power organized through convergence—that sets the stage for the central construct of this paper: the cumulative individual.

5. The Domains of Power

To explain convergence, it is necessary to specify the domains of power that are capable of accumulating and reinforcing one another within individuals. These domains are analytically distinct: each operates according to a different logic, activates different mechanisms, and leaves different empirical traces. At the same time, they are interoperable. Under contemporary conditions, activation in one domain often amplifies capacity in another. The aim here is not to re-litigate each domain's vast literature but to define each precisely enough to specify how it participates in convergence—developing at greater length the one domain, structural power, whose relation to the framework is most easily misread.

Coercive Power

Coercive power refers to the capacity to compel compliance through the credible threat or use of force, sanction, or deprivation. Its distinctive logic is negative and asymmetrical: it operates by constraining alternatives rather than persuading or attracting (Hobbes 1996; Weber 1978; Arendt 1970). Coercion is often treated as antithetical to legitimacy, yet in convergent configurations it is rarely isolated. Symbolic framing can normalize coercive acts, psychological dynamics can internalize fear or loyalty, and structural resources can routinize enforcement. In convergence, coercive power is most effective when buffered by other domains rather than exercised alone.

Structural Power

Structural power denotes the capacity to shape outcomes by controlling the rules, resources, and institutional arrangements that govern others' choices. Unlike coercion, it operates indirectly, embedding advantage in systems rather than issuing commands. Its theorization runs from Marx's account of class power lodged in the relations of production (Marx 1976) to Strange's structural power in the international economy—the power to shape the frameworks of finance, production, security, and knowledge within which others must operate, as distinct from the relational power to

make a specific actor do a specific thing (Strange 1988). The decisive reference point, however, is Lukes's third dimension of power: the capacity to shape others' very perceptions and preferences, so that consent is given to arrangements that would otherwise be contested, and domination operates without observable conflict because the grounds for objection have been pre-empted (Lukes 2005). This third face matters to the present framework for a reason that also clarifies a potential confusion. Lukes's insight—that the most effective power shapes what people take to be normal and desirable—is precisely the mechanism by which structural and symbolic power become interoperable in convergence: structural arrangements are stabilized not only by material constraint but by their appearing natural, and that appearance is symbolic work.

The framework therefore does not treat the third face as a separate domain but as the hinge at which two domains meet. What structural power contributes specifically to convergence is durability. Visibility and affect can generate authority quickly but cannot, on their own, hold it; structural leverage—capital, organizational position, control over rules and access—anchors transient gains in arrangements that persist after the moment of attention has passed. In the cumulative individual, structural power is what converts amplification into something that outlasts it.

Symbolic Power

Symbolic power is the capacity to define meaning, legitimacy, and recognition such that alignment appears voluntary rather than imposed. Its logic is constitutive rather than instrumental: it shapes what is seen as normal, desirable, or authoritative (Bourdieu 1991; Geertz 1973). Symbolic power is essential to convergence because it renders other domains intelligible and acceptable. Coercion becomes order, structure becomes fairness, and visibility becomes authority through symbolic framing. Without symbolic power, accumulation remains brittle.

Psychological Power

Psychological power operates through affect, attention, and identification. It shapes internal states—fear, trust, attachment, awe—rather than external behavior alone (Le Bon 2002; Freud 1959; Canetti 1984; Massumi 1995). Its distinctive logic is pre-reflective: it precedes deliberation and stabilizes commitment even in the absence of material incentives. Psychological power is crucial for convergence because it converts exposure into endurance. It binds followers to actors, making authority resilient to contradiction, scandal, or reversal.

Networked Power

Networked power refers to the capacity to mobilize and redirect flows of information, attention, and coordination through connective infrastructures. Its logic is relational and topological rather than hierarchical: influence depends on position within networks, control over amplification, and the ability to route around institutional chokepoints (Castells 2009; Grewal 2008; Papacharissi 2015). Networked power accelerates convergence by intensifying feedback. It amplifies symbolic signals, scales psychological attachment, and attracts structural resources at speeds unmatched by earlier forms of mediation.

Each of these domains can operate independently, and all have been extensively theorized in isolation. What distinguishes contemporary configurations of power is not the novelty of the domains themselves, but their integration. When multiple domains are activated within the same actor, their distinct logics become mutually reinforcing. These domains feed one another: recognition draws networked reach, reach deepens attachment, attachment underwrites structural leverage, and leverage in turn backs coercive capacity. Convergence emerges from this interoperability.

Defining the domains in this way prepares the ground for the central theoretical move of this paper. Power convergence does not require total dominance across all domains, nor does it imply equivalence among them. What matters is the simultaneous activation and recursive interaction of multiple domains within a single actor. It is this configuration that gives rise to the cumulative individual, to whom the analysis now turns.

6. The Cumulative Individual

The central claim of this paper is that contemporary power increasingly takes the form of convergence within individuals. To capture this configuration, I introduce the concept of the Cumulative Individual: an actor in whom multiple domains of power converge, stabilize, and recursively reinforce one another over time. The cumulative individual does not merely exercise power across different contexts or roles; they integrate coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked capacities into a single, self-reinforcing configuration.

This formulation departs from approaches that treat individuals as either vehicles of institutional power or as carriers of a single dominant modality, such as charisma or network centrality. In convergent configurations, individuals function as systems of power in their own right. Authority no longer derives primarily from formal position, office, or role, but from the capacity to activate and coordinate multiple domains simultaneously. What counts is the ability to sustain interaction among domains through feedback, rather than possession of any single resource.

Authority in this configuration emerges from recursive reinforcement rather than linear causation. Symbolic recognition increases visibility; visibility amplifies networked reach; networked reach deepens psychological attachment; psychological attachment stabilizes loyalty; stabilized loyalty attracts structural resources; structural resources enable enforcement. Each domain strengthens the others, producing a dense configuration in which power is reproduced by cycling among domains within the individual rather than being delegated outward to institutions (Castells 2009; Papacharissi 2015; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). This recirculation among domains is the opposite of the dispersive circulation described earlier: where circulation diffuses power outward until it settles nowhere, the cumulative individual is the point at which the same recursive movement turns inward and compounds.

This dynamic distinguishes the cumulative individual from earlier figures of authority. Weberian charisma, for example, emphasizes personal magnetism but treats it as episodic and unstable,

dependent on recognition rather than integration (Weber 1978). Structural accounts locate power in positions or systems, relegating individuals to functionaries (Marx 1976; Lukes 2005). Network-oriented perspectives privilege connectivity but often under-theorize durability and enforcement (Grewal 2008). The cumulative individual is not reducible to any of these. Their authority arises from the coordination of domains that earlier theories analyze separately.

Visibility, amplification, and affect play a critical catalytic role in this configuration, but they are not sufficient. Visibility alone produces attention without endurance; affect alone generates attachment without capacity; networks alone amplify signals without stabilizing them. What distinguishes cumulative individuals is the conversion of these catalytic elements into durable forms of power through structural anchoring and, where necessary, coercive backing. Without such conversion, influence remains volatile and episodic rather than cumulative.

The cumulative individual is therefore best understood as a nodal condensation of power. Power that was previously distributed across institutions, systems, or roles becomes concentrated and coordinated within the actor, allowing authority to persist across contexts and challenges. This condensation does not eliminate volatility—indeed, convergence can amplify instability—but it alters the scale and speed at which authority is produced, contested, and reproduced.

By conceptualizing individuals as sites of accumulation rather than mere participants in circulation, the concept of the cumulative individual provides a way to theorize contemporary authority without collapsing it into personality, position, or platform alone. It explains how power can be simultaneously personal and systemic, performative and durable, amplified and fragile. The remaining task is to specify how this convergence operates dynamically—how feedback, recursion, and reinforcement bind domains together—an issue taken up in the next section.

The Cumulative Individual and Adjacent Research

The cumulative individual intersects several active research programs, and its contribution is clearest when stated against them. Each of these literatures has identified a piece of the phenomenon theorized here; what convergence adds is an account of how the pieces operate as a single system.

Research on the personalization of politics has documented, across many democracies, a sustained shift of attention, evaluation, and electoral weight from parties and institutions toward individual leaders (McAllister 2007; Rahat and Kenig 2018; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis 2022). This literature establishes that authority increasingly centers on persons, but it treats personalization largely as an electoral and communicative trend—a change in how politics is presented and evaluated—rather than as a multi-domain capacity that individuals come to hold. Convergence specifies the mechanism that personalization describes as an outcome: it explains how a person becomes a site at which coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked capacities integrate, rather than merely the focal point of mediated attention.

The mediatization literature comes closer to a mechanism, theorizing how the logic of media saturates and reshapes social institutions until they operate on media's terms (Hepp 2020; Couldry and Hepp 2016). Deep mediatization supplies much of the background condition this framework assumes. But mediatization research locates the transformation primarily at the level of institutions and social domains adapting to media logic; it does not theorize the individual actor as the site at which that logic condenses into durable, transposable power. Convergence relocates the integrating function from the institutional field to the actor.

Scholarship on democratic backsliding and executive aggrandizement has produced detailed, comparative accounts of how elected leaders dismantle constraints and concentrate power (Grillo et al. 2024; Riedl et al. 2024). This work is indispensable for the sovereign-level cases taken up later in this series, and it converges with the present framework on the centrality of the individual incumbent. Yet it characteristically treats the leader as an occupant of executive office who exploits institutional weaknesses, bracketing the prior question of how that actor assembled the multi-domain capacity that makes aggrandizement possible in the first place. Convergence addresses precisely that antecedent: the actor-level accumulation that backsliding scholarship takes as its starting point.

Research on influencer and platform authority has theorized how visibility is produced, monetized, and converted into influence under algorithmic conditions (Abidin 2018; Riedl, Lukito, and Woolley 2023). This literature is the most advanced account available of the networked and symbolic domains in operation. But as the discussion of the cumulative individual has argued, visibility-based authority is theorized largely as attention and reach, with durability and enforcement undertheorized; influence is treated as a property of platform position rather than as something anchored in structural or coercive capacity that survives the platform. Convergence treats visibility as catalytic rather than constitutive, and specifies the conversion that turns reach into durable power.

Finally, the literature on elite power has long studied how advantaged actors cluster, interlock, and reproduce their position across organizational fields—though it is internally divided on whether contemporary elites are consolidating or fragmenting. One tradition, descending from Mills, emphasizes the interlocking of institutional power into a cohesive elite (Mills 1956; Bühlmann et al. 2025); another argues that the postwar elite has fractured into a less coordinated, more narrowly self-interested formation (Mizruchi 2013). The present framework does not adjudicate that dispute, because convergence operates at a different level. What elite-power analysis locates in networks and collective formations—whether cohesive or fragmented—the cumulative individual relocates to the actor: convergence describes the recursive, intra-actor dynamic by which a single person integrates capacities that elite analysis distributes across a class. The cumulative individual is less a node in a consolidated elite than an actor in whom integration occurs internally—a configuration orthogonal to whether the surrounding elite is cohering or coming apart.

Across these literatures the pattern is consistent. Each identifies a domain or a symptom of convergence—personalized authority, mediatized institutions, executive concentration, visibility-

based influence, elite interlock—and theorizes it with precision in isolation. None theorizes the integration itself: the recursive process by which these domains, studied separately, become interoperable within a single actor. That integration is the specific contribution of the cumulative individual, and the necessity of the construct rests on it.

7. Convergence, Feedback, and Recursion

Convergence is a dynamic process, not a static condition—one sustained through feedback and recursion. To specify how multiple domains of power become integrated within cumulative individuals, this section introduces Figure 3 below. Where the Pentagon in Figure 2 formalizes convergence as an organizational configuration, the Power Pentagon in Figure 3 represents convergence as a dynamic system, emphasizing recursive feedback and closure rather than structural form alone.

The terms feedback and recursion are used here in their precise systems-theoretic sense rather than as metaphors. Feedback, in the cybernetic tradition, names the condition in which the output of a process is returned as input, so that a system's behavior is shaped by its own prior states (Wiener 1948). The tradition distinguishes two forms, and the distinction is essential to what follows. Negative feedback is stabilizing: it returns a system toward equilibrium, damping deviation. Positive feedback is amplifying: deviation feeds further deviation, driving the system away from any resting point. Most institutional theory, concerned with how order is maintained, foregrounds negative feedback—the procedures and checks that return systems to stability. The dynamics theorized here are predominantly the other kind. Convergence is driven by positive feedback among domains: a gain in one does not return the system to a prior state but enables a further gain in another, which enables a further gain in the first. This is why convergent power accumulates rather than settling into a stable state, and why, as the discussion of volatility below argues, it tends toward runaway escalation and collapse rather than equilibrium.

The pentagon represents the five domains of power—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked—as analytically distinct yet dynamically connected. Each domain constitutes a node capable of activating others. What matters for convergence is not the dominance of any single domain, but the presence of feedback pathways through which activation in one domain amplifies capacity in another.

Two feedback chains are especially central.

The first runs from symbolic to networked to structural power. Symbolic acts—narratives, performances, or frames—generate recognition and legitimacy, which in turn increase visibility. Under conditions of digital mediation, visibility is rapidly translated into networked amplification, as symbolic signals circulate across platforms and publics (Castells 2009; Papacharissi 2015). Networked reach then attracts structural resources: access to capital, institutional partnerships, legal

leverage, or organizational infrastructure. What begins as symbolic recognition is thus converted into durable structural capacity through amplification and scale.

The second feedback chain runs from psychological to coercive to symbolic power. Psychological attachment—affect, identification, fear, or loyalty—stabilizes commitment and lowers resistance to enforcement (Le Bon 2002; Canetti 1984; Massumi 1995). When attachment is high, coercive acts can be deployed selectively and interpreted as legitimate, necessary, or even protective rather than arbitrary. These acts, in turn, reinforce symbolic authority by demonstrating capacity and resolve, re-coding force as order (Arendt 1970; Bourdieu 1991). Coercion thus feeds back into symbolism rather than undermining it, provided it is buffered by psychological and symbolic alignment.

These feedback mechanisms generate recursion. Power does not simply accumulate linearly; it reproduces itself through cycles of performance and response. An act of visibility invites reaction; reaction generates further exposure; exposure attracts resources; resources enable additional performance. Each cycle increases density, binding domains together more tightly. Over time, authority becomes less dependent on discrete actions and more dependent on the systemic configuration of convergence itself (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Grewal 2008).

Recursion in this strong sense—a system that takes its own operations as the basis for its further operations—is the property Luhmann attributes to self-referential social systems, which reproduce themselves by continuously referring to their own prior states and thereby achieve a form of operational closure: the system processes external disturbance only on its own terms, according to its own internal logic (Luhmann 1995). The present framework adopts this account of closure but relocates its site, and the relocation is deliberate rather than incidental. For Luhmann, self-reference is a property of impersonal social systems—law, economy, politics—and emphatically not of individuals, who figure in his theory as part of the environment of social systems rather than as systems themselves. The claim advanced here is that under conditions of mediatization, the operations of self-reference and closure that Luhmann locates in impersonal systems can be sustained around an individual: the cumulative individual processes challenge, attention, and opposition recursively, metabolizing them as inputs to its own reproduction rather than encountering them as external constraints. This is a departure from Luhmann, not an application of him, and it is the precise point at which the framework parts company with systems theory as conventionally formulated. What systems theory reserves for the impersonal, convergence relocates to the personal—which is also why convergent authority lacks the stability that institutional self-reference provides, a consequence developed below.

Recursion explains why cumulative power can persist even in the face of contradiction or disruption. Challenges are not processed as isolated events but as inputs into an existing system of reinforcement. Symbolic attacks can deepen psychological attachment; exclusion from one network can intensify mobilization in others; resistance can be re-coded as proof of significance. Power, once convergent, acquires the capacity to metabolize opposition.

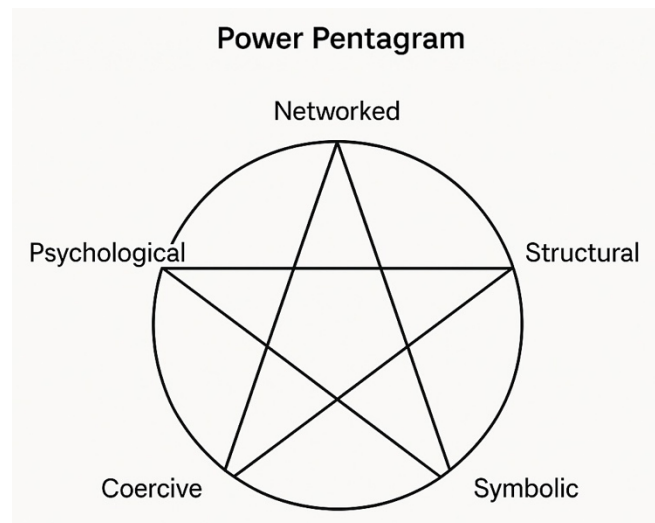


Figure 3. The Power Pentagram as a Recursive System.

The pentagram represents the five domains of power—coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked—as introduced in Figure 2. The enclosing circle denotes recursive closure, indicating how activation across domains feeds back into the cumulative individual as a self-reinforcing but non-equilibrium system rather than a linear chain of influence.

Note: The spatial arrangement of domains in the pentagram is non-directional. It represents co-presence and potential interoperability rather than fixed causal sequences; specific feedback chains discussed in the text are analytic abstractions that may operate in multiple directions depending on context.

At the same time, recursion introduces volatility. Convergence increases capacity, but it also increases fragility. Because domains are tightly coupled, shocks propagate quickly. A symbolic rupture can cascade through networks, destabilize psychological attachment, and undermine structural support. Conversely, a sudden surge in visibility can rapidly escalate authority beyond institutional control. The same feedback loops that accelerate accumulation also accelerate collapse. This is the signature of a system dominated by positive feedback and lacking the negative-feedback buffers that institutions normally supply: without mechanisms returning the system toward equilibrium, the very coupling that drives accumulation also transmits disturbance undamped across domains.

This duality is structural rather than accidental. Convergent configurations trade institutional buffering for speed and density. Where authority is distributed across systems, failure is localized; where authority is condensed through convergence, perturbations reverberate across domains. Power organized through recursion is therefore inherently unstable, characterized by rapid expansion and contraction rather than steady equilibrium.

The Power Pentagram captures this dynamic by design. It is not directional, hierarchical, or deterministic. Any node can activate any other, and feedback can flow in multiple directions. Convergence emerges from interaction, not sequence. By formalizing these dynamics, the pentagram

clarifies how cumulative individuals sustain authority through integration and feedback—while also explaining why such authority is powerful, precarious, and prone to volatility.

8. Implications for Authority and Institutional Order

When convergence intensifies and stabilizes, its effects extend beyond individual actors to the organization of authority itself. Power that is condensed through recursive feedback does not remain confined to personal influence; it reconfigures the surrounding institutional environment. As cumulative individuals accumulate multi-domain capacity, institutions increasingly respond to them rather than containing them. Authority, in these conditions, shifts from being primarily mediated through offices, procedures, and formal roles to being anchored in actors whose capacity derives from convergence rather than position.

The significance of this shift is clearest against the account of institutions it disturbs. Institutions are, on the standard view, precisely the mechanisms that prevent authority from concentrating in persons. Weber's theory of legal-rational domination makes the point constitutive: authority is vested in offices rather than incumbents, governed by impersonal rules, so that legitimacy survives the replacement of any individual and cannot be appropriated by them (Weber 1978). Historical-institutionalist accounts add the temporal dimension that explains why this arrangement is durable rather than merely formal. Institutions generate path dependence: once established, rules and procedures raise the cost of deviation, entrench expectations, and reproduce themselves through positive feedback of their own, so that they constrain even powerful actors who would prefer otherwise (Pierson 2004). This is what institutional buffering names—the capacity of impersonal, self-reproducing arrangements to absorb, slow, and contain the ambitions of individuals. The claim of this section is not that buffering disappears under convergence but that its direction of advantage can reverse. The same path-dependent feedback that ordinarily entrenches institutional constraint can, when a cumulative individual achieves sufficient multi-domain density, begin to entrench the individual's position instead, as institutions adjust their routines around an actor they can neither ignore nor contain.

This alters the functional role of institutions without displacing them, and Mann's distinction between two kinds of state power specifies how. Despotic power is the capacity to act over society by command; infrastructural power is the capacity to penetrate, coordinate, and act through society's institutional fabric (Mann 1986). Convergent individuals rarely operate despotically—they seldom command institutions outright. They operate through infrastructural power that is already in place, routing symbolic, networked, and structural capacity through existing bureaucratic, legal, and organizational channels, which respond by adjusting rules, norms, and enforcement to the actor's visibility and reach. Institutions thereby become reactive in a precise sense: they retain their procedures and personnel and continue to function, but the initiative shifts to the cumulative individual, and institutional action increasingly takes the form of response to convergent power rather than its containment. Bureaucratic procedures, legal frameworks, and organizational

hierarchies are not abolished; they are increasingly subordinated to dynamics of amplification, affect, and networked response. Authority is stabilized less by institutional continuity than by the ongoing performance and reinforcement of convergent power (Castells 2009).

Under these conditions, legitimacy becomes increasingly personalized—a reversal, in the strict sense, of the Weberian depersonalization described above. Recognition, trust, and compliance are directed toward individuals who appear to embody multiple domains of power simultaneously, rather than toward the abstract systems that legal-rational authority was designed to privilege. This personalization does not eliminate institutional mediation, but it weakens its buffering function. Institutions mediate after the fact—ratifying, constraining, or contesting authority that has already been constituted through convergence rather than constituting it in the first place. Endurance thus becomes contingent not only on institutional design but on the stability of the recursive feedback loops within cumulative actors, and is correspondingly exposed to the volatility those loops carry.

These dynamics raise fundamental questions for theories of authority. If power can stabilize through convergence rather than office, how durable are institutional forms designed for fragmentation and dispersion? How resilient are systems that assume legitimacy flows impersonally when authority increasingly crystallizes around visible, affectively charged individuals? And under what conditions do institutions retain the capacity to mediate, absorb, or redirect convergent power?

A boundary must be drawn here precisely, because it marks the limit of what this paper claims. Everything argued above describes institutions that have become reactive while remaining structurally distinct from the actors they respond to. However far the initiative shifts toward the cumulative individual, courts retain jurisdiction, bureaucracies retain procedural autonomy, and coercive institutions retain independent chains of command; they accommodate, resist, or partially absorb convergent power, but they do so as agents with their own footing. This paper does not claim more than that. The further possibility—that institutions cease to function as independent constraints and begin to operate as integrated components of the convergent system itself—would constitute a change in kind rather than degree, and it is deliberately not asserted here. Political authority, and in some cases sovereignty, may emerge as downstream outcomes of convergence rather than as its starting point; when cumulative power scales into state structures, the distinction between personal and institutional authority can begin to blur. But these are consequences of convergent dynamics, not features of the framework established in this paper, and specifying the threshold at which reactive institutions become integrated ones requires analysis this paper does not undertake. The analytic priority here remains with convergence itself: the system-level processes through which power condenses, feeds back, and reorders—without yet dissolving—the relationship between individuals and institutions.

9. Conclusion: Toward a Theory of Power Convergence

This article has advanced a theory of power convergence centered on the concept of the Cumulative Individual. Rather than treating power as dispersed across isolated domains or anchored solely in institutions, this account identifies how coercive, structural, symbolic, psychological, and networked capacities increasingly condense within individual actors. When these domains converge, stabilize, and recursively reinforce one another, individuals function not merely as participants in systems of power but as systems of power themselves.

The concept of the cumulative individual addresses a central limitation of existing power theories. Classical and contemporary approaches have yielded rich insights into specific modalities of authority, yet they remain analytically fragmented. Power convergence foregrounds how these modalities interact dynamically, producing forms of authority that are not well captured by charisma, office, capital, or networks taken singly. The framework arrives at this account not by superseding existing theories but by working through them—drawing the dynamic of accumulation against Foucault's circulation, the integration of heterogeneous sources alongside and apart from Mann, recursion and closure from Luhmann while relocating their site to the individual, and the personalization of legitimacy as a reversal of the depersonalization Weber made constitutive of modern authority. Its contribution lies in synthesizing what these approaches theorize separately into a single account of how domains converge.

The theory of convergence developed here is intentionally foundational. It offers a developmental logic for how authority organizes, a set of analytically distinct but interoperable domains of power, and a systems-level account of feedback and recursion. These elements render the framework extensible and empirically tractable. Future research can operationalize convergence through comparative analysis, digital trace data, historical reconstruction, or network metrics, testing how cumulative power forms, stabilizes, and collapses across contexts.

This article has examined how convergence reorders the relationship between individuals and institutions, but it has deliberately stopped at a specific boundary. It has shown how institutions can become reactive to cumulative individuals while remaining structurally distinct from them; it has not asserted the further condition in which institutions cease to function as independent constraints and become integrated components of the convergent system. That threshold—where reactive institutions become constitutive of, rather than distinct from, the actor they respond to—marks the point at which convergence would scale into sovereignty proper. Specifying it requires analysis the present framework grounds but does not itself undertake, and it is the task to which subsequent work in this series turns.

This article therefore positions power convergence not as a closed theory, but as the opening move in a broader research program. By identifying the cumulative individual as a distinct analytical construct and convergence as a systemic dynamic, it provides a foundation for examining

contemporary transformations in authority, legitimacy, and institutional order. Where convergence scales toward political authority, institutional power may become reactive to the recursive capacity of individual actors rather than the sole source of their authority—though whether it crosses from reactive to constitutive is a question this paper leaves open for the analysis that follows. Understanding power under these conditions requires moving beyond fragmented accounts of coercion, structure, symbolism, affect, or networks, and toward an integrated framework capable of explaining how authority condenses, stabilizes, and destabilizes through convergence. The theory of power convergence offers a starting point for that task.

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