THE FORMS OF POWER

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Power moves, warms and threatens all of us, and it is disturbing that power has become visibly problematic and unpredictable. It expands with a relentless logic as men wrestle nature into strange shapes, vault into space and race to create new forms of wealth, persuasion and terror. It destroys the earth, menacing air and water; even when it seems benign, as in medicine, it helps conjure the possibility of an over-populated planet. Yet it also seems curiously ineffective; ragged guerrillas defy great powers, students show contempt for wealth and for the state, black militants face force with defiance.

Adolph A. Berle, Power. Harcourt, Brace, & World. $10.00.

This is only to say what the old sages knew, that power is a demon and that bargains with demons are chance things at best. Adolph Berle’s massive Power sets forth a magician’s creed, that power can be bound by institutions, controlled to serve the purposes of men; and that power is an essential of the good life. It is an old creed in the West, one which helped create and helps to define modernity, the belief that man can—and must, for his own happiness—master nature, subjecting the powers of the universe to his will. And since he must, the task of human prudence consists in devising means to insure that power will not turn its teeth on its master.

But that creed, even in its days of high confidence—and how long ago that seems!—understood that nature, and with nature, power, must be obeyed in order to be commanded. Nature and power alike yield only to certain spells, pronounced in proper form, and are recalcitrant toward all others. Hence, George Ball’s reference to The Discipline of Power: Power has a logic of its own, a set of restraints; the servant imposes a way of life on the master, the tool controls its user.

In our times, the demands of power seem more and more excessive. In an imperial order, it is power that becomes imperious, allowing no time for reflection and seemingly dragging men and states in its train. It is no surprise that Senator Fulbright writes of The Arrogance of Power, and when Senator McCarthy speaks of The Limits of Power, he seems something of an optimist in his faith that power is not already beyond control.

Yet like all the demons, power acquires its sway because it speaks to the desires of men. Complex definitions are unnecessary; power is simply the ability to do something, a means to an end. Morally, then, power is no better and no worse than the end it serves, and without reference to the end, power is impotent. Possession of the whole world is an obstacle, not a power, to one who would save his soul; the power of the soul may be a serious annoyance to one who would control the world.

Lord Acton’s famous saw, that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” is nonsense. It verges on heresy; as a Catholic, Acton must not have known he was suggesting that God is absolutely corrupt. Power does not corrupt, it reveals. Weakness causes men to hide their own evil, sometimes even from themselves. And in the same sense, weakness often causes men to conceal their own morality, for fear of being victimized or for fear of loss.

Henry V was made more responsible by power; Harry Truman in the Presidency rose above the racism he voiced out of it; the villains were villainous before power allowed them to act out their inner dreams.

That, of course, is what makes Acton’s dictum ring true. There is a corruption buried in almost all men, a hatred for their own finitude and dependence, a wish to deny or destroy everything that eludes their control. Power speaks to the “darkened shadow of omnipotence” which St. Augustine saw in all men, the hard fact of original sin. And even when our minds are forewarned, there are inherent satisfactions in dominion.

Man by himself, Hobbes pointed out, is irreparably weak, constantly menaced by nature and by men. Virtually all forms of power, he continued, are the
result of covenants and contracts, the by-product of political cooperation between men. In that vital sense, there is no conflict between my power and that of another; an increase in the power of one increases that of all.

But though Hobbes knew that such a case could be rationally compelling, he also recognized that it wars with the deepest emotions of men. Strictly rational competition, even for objects which cannot be shared, can be resolved—though all competitors may be partly frustrated. The problem, Hobbes argued, is two-fold. Men are subject to vainglory, the desire to compare themselves to others, and hence the problem that power is not seen as something absolute but as something relative. If my income rises five dollars, but yours rises ten dollars, I may feel less powerful rather than more. Americans are wealthier and more powerful—in absolute terms—than they were ten years ago; if many feel less so, it is because they fear they have fallen relative to other states, other races and ethnic groups, or friends and fellows. And, as Hobbes recognized, even vainglory is rooted in suspicion, the partly guilty knowledge of what others may do, and the awareness of envy and resentment. That, in turn, is a lesson learned by a still earlier desire, the yearning to be safe. Security is the great hope behind the craving for power.

Power does not corrupt it; it reveals.

Hence the logic of power's expansion. We acquire possessions and powers in the quest for safety, but each becomes a new source of anxiety, the logical object of envy, and requires a protection of its own. Nor is it only material goods that are involved. Being respected and admired, especially the knowledge of being loved, is perhaps the greatest source of security men know, and most of the power they grasp for is designed to be a means to that end. But that state of being is a source of envy, greater if it is combined with social prominence and deference. Harold Lasswell commented that "elites of deference" are almost the opposite of "elites of safety." And both resent the fact. The prominent yearn, idyllically, for privacy and pastorality; the obscure dream, often resentfully, of glory. They do more than dream; sometimes they strike down those who are heroes to others.

All of this is hardly a secret to modern men. The massive technology which satisfies so many needs, real or imagined, creates gigantic threats, directly and indirectly. DuPont's old slogan, "better things for better living through chemistry," acquires an ironic meaning with the new technology of mind-shaping drugs or with rivers become vats and fire-hazards. Most difficult, perhaps, is the fact that the scale and complexity of a world whose powers can meet the needs of men in one sense, utterly deprives them of feelings of importance and dignity in another.

That, in turn, touches the central political problem of the times, one less visible than many highly publicized "crises." The gigantism of human collective power deprives men of dignity, but, even-handed, it gives them some compensation. The fact of unimportance allows men to avoid the sense of moral accountability and responsibility. Though Americans fill their private lives, over which they feel some control, with petty duties and trivial obligations, they have become more than latitudinarian with respect to public conduct. This is more than a matter of small things; it involves an insistence on one's rights to "do it," hardly more moral when voiced by the left than by the right (or, in my view, when it involves our "right" to murder the unborn). It is, however, a partly rational response. Largely impotent men, for whom high standards would result only in ineffectiveness or loss, cannot be expected to ask much of themselves.

They do, however, ask and expect much of the collectivity of which they are a part. It cannot offer the excuse of inability—as poorer states can—for the fact of its immense power is evident. This is partly an old phenomenon in America. Before the Puritans even landed, John Winthrop counselled them that, being free from persecution and an established order, they should not think that "the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as He doth from those among whom we have lived. . . ." But Winthrop was speaking to a political conscience which modern Americans lack, the sense possible for a politis or a smaller community of the relation between individual conduct and public action. And while it is quite appropriate for Americans to expect their government to conduct itself according to the highest standards, there is an
elementary contradiction in demanding that it be exceptionally moral while we act according to our wont. Though the truth may be something men hide, or which becomes hidden, there is no "it."

Power, however, has brought us to a condition of radical political scarcity. More and more claims are made on government, less and less is offered to it. The disequilibrium is extreme and growing; conflict, whoever initiates it and for whatever purposes, is written in the situation.

The case is no different for states in relation to each other. All, even—or especially—the Great Powers, claim the excuse of impotence. They can be no better than their potential antagonists; they are surrounded by enemies; they are threatened by change. At the same time, probably at no other point in history have nations and governments been so insistent that the "international community," and most especially other states, live by the most exacting measure of obligation. The gentlemanly diplomacy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was, at least, comparatively free from cant: the Paris talks about Vietnam consist largely of sermons in which each side attempts to morally bludgeon the other into living up to standards that each would reject for himself.

This crisis of political scarcity makes the current interest in political power welcome as well as timely. The great increase in power in the industrial nations has been one of instruments, of techniques and devices. Power in that form is at its most indifferent, wholly unconcerned with its master. It may be imitated or stolen, or—like land and resources—simply conquered, without loss of efficiency. Such transferable power, however, has a limitation; to be politically effective it must affect men. And, as with all things human, that necessity introduces problems.

Power, in fact, often results from the belief in its existence; it is that aspect of power that led Bertrand de Jouvène to refer to its "magical origins." In the long and acrimonious debate on the question of the existence of a "power elite" in the United States, critics of the idea, led by Robert Dahl, protested that there is no evidence of some group which "regularly prevails" in contests over policy. But long before, Harold Lasswell had pointed out that the very fact of a contest suggests that an elite is weakening. Those who resent its sway engage in a mental comparison of their strength with that of the "elite," and if they believe themselves certain to be defeated, they delay the struggle. For that reason, Lasswell argued, the test of an elite is not a real but a "hypothetical" contest between groups. And, it should be noted, what matters is not who would win in fact but what men believe about its ability to conquer. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, supposedly the hey-day of "realism," diplomacy often ignored the United States and Japan, but always included Italy and Austria among the "Great Powers." The myth was to have its costs, but the powers it believed in—though little more than figments of the imagination—helped shape the modern world. For that matter, Protestants are not likely to be impressed by the Papal power to "bind and loose," but they have never denied the power that the belief in such potency conveys in the affairs of men.

Power is greatest over us when we identify some critical value, or more importantly, ourselves, with the community or the individuals who command. "Force alone can establish Power, habit alone can keep it in being," de Jouvène writes, "but to expand, it must have credit...." The highest form of credit is identity, for most men loan willingly to themselves; the second highest is that of value—of morality and right—which raises power above calculation (though some men prudently, if guiltily, will hang back). It is for that reason that words are vital to power; if a man says he "is" an Englishman or a Communist, he is asserting a vital, inseparable bond between England or the Communist Party and himself. In its highest forms, that bond makes it impossible for the individual to imagine his separate survival or—even—his separate thought. And a credibility gap always threatens power because, far more than the threat to its "trustworthiness" in a narrow sense, the fact of a gap creates or awakes the sense of the distance between he who obeys and those who command.

The bond between commander and commanded is authority, something which not only commands men's conduct; it commands their minds. It is the creature of faith or, more humanly, of the small community, the world of kinsmen and fellow citizens without which life, for the individual, is not worth living. We can still see the latter, though it huddles in private places which fringe the political order if they touch it at all—the conjugal family, and the isolated friendships that withstand the logic of society which keeps bonds superficial and rends even those apart. The authority of faith shows hardly at all in relation to science. If experimenters pronounce that there is such a thing as DNA, for example, we take the assertion as fact; the "experimental method" is itself taken on faith, for we have not performed the experiments. The authority of science, however, is more and more suspect morally; it may define our world, but we reject
its authority to define ourselves. Scientific authority is, in fact, a relic of the nineteenth century, probably destined to pass as all authorities seem to from our lives.

Governments, in fact, are fortunate if they can maintain the lesser standard of legitimacy. A "legitimate government," like a "legitimate argument," is not a government which is right or accurate in our minds. It is one for which a case can be made, which can be defended, whose claims cannot be rejected out of hand. The feeling of legitimacy presumes a separation between government and ourselves, and a suspicion of the rightness of what it commands. Legitimacy insists that we refrain from opposing a regime, which may mean that we are forced to obey it; it does not command the most important side of our will, nor does it order us to offer "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." The words, as might be expected, differ: authority is associated with terms like obligation, duty, honor, while legitimacy must rest with the more passive term, loyalty.

Utilitarian calculus, as more than one "scientific" regime has discovered, is a dangerous business. It is at best a prediction, a more or less informed guess about what you value, and how much, and about my own values and the costs I will pay. Both are uncertain before the event, and although little is lost except time if you fail to respond to the promise of reward, if I miscalculate your willingness to yield to threats of punishment, I will be involved with resistance, often at a cost I would not choose to pay—a confrontation which leads to defeat. An additional uncertainty is that even if my calculus is right, it turns on your belief in my promises and my threats—something of much concern in the theory of deterrence and elsewhere in human affairs. Violence, the extreme form of punishment, is the most rapid form of power in achieving its end, and demands the least of the relationship between us—if it works. But for those reasons, it is also the least likely to work of all the forms of power. And violence moves from threat to actuality only when the powerful have lost one vital element of supremacy—the belief, held by the weak, in their moral or physical ascendancy.

Instruments and threats of violence have become more characteristic of political life because power is less, because those who command are less secure and fear to move unless armed to the teeth. Ours is a time which seems to have lost almost all lineaments of a genuinely common moral order; shouts of righteous slogans by individuals, however sincerely held, are different from the sense of community, and "Woodstock Nation" is no more convincing as a patria than were the revival meetings it so resembled as a reflection of the civitas dei. We have lost, too, any sense of personal bond to those who command because—with very few exceptions—we feel and know that as individuals we are unimportant to them. Statistics are an adequate measure in insurance, but not in politics. When "authorities" lack authority, when their relation with us becomes impersonal, they can hope at best for legitimacy. That, as they have not always realized, means they cannot violate any profound conviction of ours; the burden of proof, moreover, is on them when they ask for sacrifice. If we cannot be certain that we are heard, or that our rulers out of knowledge of our selves take us into account, we can at least demand the right to persuade. If that, in turn, fails to materialize, governments will be forced to utility, and perhaps ultimately to violence. That, after all, is the inner meaning of the demand for "order." Such techniques can enable a regime to remain "in power"; they do not make it powerful. And nothing less is required to deal with the darkening skies of our time than all the powers at men's command.