
Power, Again

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Each of the participants in this exchange are willing, more or less, to give a hearing to my argument about power. That the argument is also eliciting some puzzlement and misunderstanding is not surprising; it runs counter to some deeply ingrained habits of thought.

Before discussing the three comments, I should probably remind the reader of how the debate between Paul Gottfried and me got started. I have long tried to show that power relations are a good deal more complex than is usually assumed by students of politics. In the *Humanitas* article that precipitated the current discussion I took up the subject with special reference to Professor Gottfried's book *After Liberalism*. In the article and in a later rejoinder to Professor Gottfried I expressed reservations about simply identifying political power with coercion. I questioned that political elites autonomously generate their own power, that they exercise power unilaterally, and that they, more than any other elites, shape the long-term direction of society. I also questioned a positivistic-sociological conception of elites.

Political elites do not simply impose their will on a people. Their being in power is in an important sense symptomatic of the moral-cultural-intellectual life of society, which is shaped in the long run by thinkers and artists as much as by politicians. Political elites sometimes affect the future decisively, but they can and cannot do various things depending on the moral-cultural-intellectual climate of their societies. In addition, there is always an element of give and take, of power sharing, between rulers and ruled. Political elites can exercise authority because of an existing or incipient willingness, however grudging in some cases, to ac-

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cept their rule. The ground for their authority must have been prepared within the larger civilization to which they belong. The time must have become "ripe." Not even a totalitarian regime can generate all of its power from within itself and exercise it in utter disregard of the deepest beliefs of a people. To some extent it must even derive its authority from traditions that it despises. During the Second World War Stalin asked the armies of the Soviet Union to fight not for the Communist party or the proletariat but for "Mother Russia." Even radical political departures from traditional ways are prepared in the mind and the imagination of a people and are made possible by a simmering social crisis related to the larger trends of civilization.

Political and other elites are never wholly distinct from the rest of society. They blend into other social groups. Being first of all members of the human race, they are not defined exclusively or mainly by their political functions or positions. In the end, they cannot be clearly differentiated. For that reason, the term "elite," must, like many other terms that are very useful but philosophically coarse, be employed with caution, so that in reflection about sociopolitical phenomena a simple, unambiguous theoretical abstraction does not replace complex, ambiguous human reality.

Elites finally cannot be differentiated.

Attending to the complexities of power relations and the formation of elites counteracts wishful thinking about the problems of Western civilization and how they might be addressed. It becomes impossible to pin all blame for what is going wrong in society on political elites. Indignation cannot be as easily focused and unleashed. It is discouraging, of course, to be told that reversing present destructive trends cannot be accomplished by removing particular individuals from office but will require nothing less than a transformation of civilization. Who wants to wait that long? Imagine the scope of the task at hand, all the work to be done! How much more appealing to think that a decisive election victory or some other political avalanche might set everything right. Are not the problems of Western civilization large and acute and urgently in need of attention? They are indeed, but no fast-acting remedies are available.

Political elites only partially to blame.

It should be added that a narrowly political approach need not produce false hopes but may produce the very opposite, an unduly dark pessimism. A person who thinks that politics in the constricted sense is what shapes the future and can see no realistic

chance of dislodging present political elites may fall into despair and cynicism. A response to both wishful thinking and unrelieved pessimism is that politics may ultimately not be the crux of the matter.

American thought and culture has long been prone to exaggerating the importance and efficacy of politics. One example is the obsession with the Presidency, which amounts virtually to a cult. Many think of the President as holding the future in his hands. Implicit in this fascination is the assumption that a right-thinking President, supported by a right-thinking Congress, could restore America. But what, pray tell, would produce such a change in the first place? Without a prior major change in the moral-cultural-intellectual climate of society, what would produce these right-thinking public officials and all the right-thinking citizens who would vote for them? A realistic analysis of political elites reveals that they owe their ascent and composition largely to trends within the civilization in which they form.

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totalitarianism
a sign of a
deteriorated
civilization.*

Who could deny that, due to the sheer size and intrusiveness of government today, political elites can influence the moral sensibility, thinking and imagination of Americans? A good case can even be made that American government, like European government, is developing totalitarian traits, though these may not yet be of the most comprehensive, brutal kind exemplified by the Soviet Union. Still, it is not possible adequately to understand creeping totalitarianism in America and the rest of the Western world without recognizing that it is made possible by the evolving moral, cultural, intellectual life of Western society, which produces human beings accepting and even supportive of this kind of regime. Dr. Woltermann's description of the "fatuous" personality common in Western society here seems apt. If government is taking on totalitarian aspects, it is not simply the result of nasty political operatives seizing power and ramming unpalatable views and reforms down the throats of the reluctant masses—though such pressures are growing and having an effect. The totalitarian creep is made possible first of all by the propensities of a deteriorated civilization: by ways of living, thinking and imagining. It goes without saying that the growth of government increases the ability of power-hungry politicians to reinforce the general trends that brought them to power.

In my view, Professor Gottfried's conception of political elites

does not sufficiently recognize that these elites do not autonomously create the predispositions in a people on which their reign depends. A naturalistic, Hobbesian, “brass tacks” notion of power that places undue emphasis on “coercion” and “physical force” conceals dimensions of power that may be the most highly relevant to explaining the troubles of Western civilization. There are many good reasons to criticize present political elites, but society’s decline has other important sources, including our own lazy or unthinking complicity. In calling for a subtler, more comprehensive conception of power, I am calling for a more realistic assessment of existing problems and of the means and obstacles to a reinvigoration of civilization.

Professor Gottfried is not unreceptive to my argument, I believe, yet he gives the impression of wishing to minimize its importance. Commenting on my reservations about his approach to power and elites, he writes rather dismissively: “Apparently I fail to valorize sufficiently the spiritual and aesthetical side of the problem”—as if such a deficiency were marginal to his subject. Gottfried’s choice of the word “aesthetical” has the effect of belittling my position in that it makes many, perhaps especially conservatives, think of effeminate aesthetes contemplating weird or trivial art objects at an esoteric Greenwich Village exhibition. My own concern is not with the prettiness or ugliness of surface phenomena but with the great power of the imagination to shape our fundamental outlook on life and thereby the direction and context of politics, especially over time, through the arts, entertainment, religion, and the humanities. As widely used, the word “aesthetical” carries narrow connotations that do not convey the breadth and depth of the power in question.

“The spiritual and aesthetical side of the problem” not marginal.

No, Dr. Woltermann, my reservation about Professor Gottfried’s notions of political power and elites is not that he fails to use a particular term, “imagination,” with sufficient frequency. My complaint is that he gives insufficient attention to how the force to which the term refers affects political power relations and the formation of elites.

Professor DeRosa raises good questions that seem to me compatible with my general argument. I would add the following: Whether political power is justly or unjustly exercised, with or without the “consent” of a people, the power in question cannot

be fully understood by concentrating on “coercion” and “physical force.”

Professor DeRosa attributes to me a “trust” in the “moral and cultural constituents of power relations and the corresponding element of mutuality between leaders and followers.” But to stress their importance is not the same as to “trust” them to develop in the right direction. On the contrary, I agree with Professor DeRosa that “those moral and cultural constituents have been substantially corrupted.” It is precisely for this reason that we cannot hope to reawaken the spirit of civilization or even change government for the better in some enduring way by narrowly political means. Politics would of course form part of any renewal of civilization, but it is the direction of the moral and cultural life of society that will be the very heart of the matter, even for politics itself.

Suppose that economic, social and/or military disasters produced widespread fear and anger in America and that there was a successful political rebellion against present trends. Because of the generally unsettled circumstances, new government might have a decisive impact on the evolution of society, but the nature of that impact, too, would depend on the moral, cultural and intellectual resources of the new leaders and the readiness or reluctance of Americans to follow them.

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needed.*

A word to Dr. Woltermann about the need for evidence. Of course we need evidence, the more the better. But I do not think that Professor Gottfried has failed to marshal evidence for his point of view. On the contrary, his thesis about the managerial elites and the decline of liberalism is plausible just because it is based on plentiful evidence. The real issue is *what kind* of evidence is most needed. Which outlook on life, which epistemology, if you prefer, affords the most penetrating view and gives the proper emphasis to the most relevant evidence? I have suggested that Professor Gottfried’s class-oriented notion of political elites neglects some of the most important evidence. If Dr. Woltermann’s call for more “empirical” evidence will take us further in the direction of some kind of sociologism or other form of naturalism, he is proposing a general method that has been one of the origins and accompaniments of what Professor Gottfried calls the managerial state. We do need the facts, but as apprehended by the non-reductionistic, historical-philosophical mind.

I have complained, accordingly, about abstract as distinguished

from historically concrete observation of complex reality. Dr. Woltermann, and, to some extent, Professor Gottfried complain about my being too abstract, but here they are raising an issue quite different from the one just discussed. They are really complaining that what I am arguing is not easy to understand. This is probably true. Any writer could express himself more clearly and explain himself more fully, for example, by writing a book rather than an article. Some ideas are simply difficult and will seem “abstract” to someone not yet accustomed to them. The main reason for the complaint that I am too abstract, I hazard, is simply impatience with philosophical reasoning. Let’s be down to earth, let’s get down to practical realities, Drs. Woltermann and Gottfried seem to be saying. Philosophical ideas may be fine, in their own place, but in a discussion of politics we should be concentrating on the “brass tacks.” But my whole point is that a flawed general outlook on politics, a flawed philosophy, will lead an observer to misconstrue the “brass tacks” and give undue emphasis to some evidence while neglecting or discounting other important evidence.

One of the major weaknesses of American and Anglo-Saxon political thought has long been a prejudice against philosophy that goes beyond vague generalities. Americans have every reason to take pride in a generally pragmatic view of life. It protects them against the presumption and simplifications of abstract theorizing. But all too often the pragmatic attitude turns into a smug disdain for philosophical reflection, even for philosophy of the historical, non-abstract type. All too often disinterest in the more difficult issues of philosophy leads to a cramped view of politics and to thoughtless, shortsighted, *ad hoc* practical action. Lack of philosophical interest and discipline is a major reason why American intellectual conservatism has had difficulty resisting present trends and why it is increasingly overwhelmed by rather shoddy ideological and propagandistic thinking.

*Anglo-Saxon
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prejudiced
against
philosophy.*

Inconspicuously and in passing I took “the beauty of a woman” as one of a number of seemingly farfetched examples of power that a pseudo-realist might dismiss as irrelevant to the study of politics. Instead of taking on my larger argument in his first response to my article, Professor Gottfried lifted that example out of context and presented it as if it had been the centerpiece of my argument. A particular illustration of forms of power thus ac-

quired a wholly unintended prominence. I appreciate Dr. Woltermann's defense on this point. I agree that I could have made more of that example, as I could have made more of any of the other "farfetched" examples listed, but I was most interested in getting my general argument across: that power comes in many forms and that notions of politics and elites colored by positivistic-naturalistic thinking miss moral and cultural dimensions essential to a realistic understanding of power.

I do not want to end this rejoinder without reiterating that I think Professor Gottfried's *After Liberalism* contains much of value. I have tried to supplement and qualify rather than refute his general argument. Also, though my article on "Dimensions of Power" discussed his book at length, it was not written to be a commentary on that book but to set forth a wider, more nuanced view of power than the one favored by most students of politics.

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