**Understanding Power**

No doubt, power is one of the central concepts of political philosophy. Even if it isn’t the main focus of political analysis, it is always lurking on the periphery of every political question. Power is not static, otherwise it could not be transferred or exercised. Power is dynamic, it moves, it exists as a quantity and a quality, it is ever-changing and always amorphous. That ‘power’ moves, changes, qualifies, quantifies, morphs; it, in a single term, ‘affects’. In this sense, power is a charisma, an ability, a capacity, a potential, and a faculty. The charisma, ability, capacity, potential, and faculty in question is the singular act which power performs: affect, the application of intensity from a body which corresponds to the augmentation or diminution of a body’s ability to act. In short, in political philosophy, we think of power as a force, from one body, that changes, directs, or influences a body’s ability to act.

Power, as a concept, is often taken for granted. Questions of political philosophy often accept a hierarchical model of power that places supreme power into the hands of the sovereign. To this end, political philosophy theorizes power in terms of the analysis of an attribute of a sovereign, and therefore political philosophy immediately is made to turn its head to ask questions about the best “form” of power, or the best way to distribute power, or what the principles and structure of the state or sovereign that exerts its supreme power should look like. Political philosophy concerns itself with things like justice, order, production, the social contract, security, and permission and prohibition. All of these concepts are ultimately questions about power, the regulating of other surrounding bodies and their abilities to act.

The classical theory of sovereignty essentially equivocates power with state power, viewing power as that which descends in a top-down movement from the sovereign to the individual. A plethora of political philosophers have analyzed the state, here is a general account of the Western traditions understanding of the sovereign and state.

**Understanding Sovereignty**

"The 'state' on the modern conception is a legally defined term which refers, at the level of substance, to a state power that possesses both internal and external sovereignty, at the spatial level over a clearly delimited terrain (the state territory) and at the social level over the totality of members (the body of citizens or the people).” (Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory, 1998)

“Given the extensive involvement of state violence in the process by which the corporate elite not only achieved its wealth but continues to maintain and augment its wealth in the present, it is clear that the massive inequalities of wealth that characterize present-day ‘capitalist’ society are radically inconsistent with any approach to justice in holdings that is even remotely Nozickian.” Roderick Long, Griffith Law Review, Vol 21 Issue 2, (2012)

“Given the tendency of nations, particularly great powers, to engage in war unjustifiably and to set in motion the apparatus of the state to suppress dissent, the respect accorded to pacifism serves the purpose of alerting citizens to the wrongs that governments are prone to commit in their name.” (John Rawls, A Theory of Justice)

“The attaining to this Soveraigne Power, is by two wayes. One, by Naturall force; as when a man maketh his children, to submit themselves, and their children to his government, as being able to destroy them if they refuse, or by Warre subdueth his enemies to his will, giving them their lives on that condition. The other, is when men agree amongst themselves, to submit to some Man, or Assembly of men, voluntarily, on confidence to be protected by him against all others. This later, may be called a Politicall Common-wealth, or Common-wealth by Institution; and the former, a Common-wealth by Acquisition.” (Hobbes, Leviathan)

“Thus we see, that the kings of the Indians in America, which is still a pattern of the first ages in Asia and Europe, whilst the inhabitants were too few for the country, and want of people and money gave men no temptation to enlarge their possessions of land, or contest for wider extent of ground, are little more than generals of their armies; and though they command absolutely in war, yet at home and in time of peace they exercise very little dominion, and have but a very moderate sovereignty, the resolutions of peace and war being ordinarily either in the people, or in a council. (Locke, Second Treatise on Civil Government)

These quotes display the context of the classical theory of sovereignty. The state is legally defined, and possesses an internal and external sovereignty: it is both geographic and social, controlling territory and bodies. It employs violence to achieve, maintain, augment itself. It also causes massive inequalities, affecting relations between bodies underneath it. It has a tendency to engage in war, suppress dissent, and is prone to committing wrongs. The sovereign attains power in two ways: by subduing its enemies or by a voluntary oath of protection against others. It commands absolutely, but exercises light dominion when peace is kept. In short, the supreme power of the sovereign was the power to *take*, and ultimately, to *take* life.

**Weber’s Problem**

As the industrial revolution swept through the West, society began to experience increasing levels of rationalization. Max Weber argued that this rationalization was concerned with efficiency, bureaucracy, classification, organization, etc. The process of rationalization is not a cultural phenomenon, but a result of the scientific and technological advancements that increasingly grew the human capacity of mastery over space. Weber says that rationalization involves, “an increasingly theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts”. The power to arrange meaning, assign purpose, apply logic would simultaneously diffuse the absolute sovereign as a body and sublimate state power into increasingly precise and abstract institutions. Institutions like the school system, the healthcare system, the legal system, the prison system, the production system, the family system, etc did not arise out of the power of the sovereign, rather these institutions productive ends have been brought under state control through the process of rationalization under the guidance of the modern technological innovation of bureaucracy,

Bureaucracies are highly predictable, offering a high degree of assurance with what can and will be provided. All rationalized systems focus on quantity, applying bureaucracy as the technology used to efficiently quantify, predict, and control by using more automated means. This technology is applied by the state power through other institutions such as the law, the police, licensing, and regulations.

**Discipline**

With the rise of modernity and the rationalizing tendency, both state and society begin to move in the direction of complexification. Liberalism, which between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries swept over the West, brought forth the consciousness of “natural rights”, introducing more fluidity, bargaining, and conditions into the Hobbesian social contract. The failure of government regulation to accommodate these natural rights was a technological failure brought about by incapability of the machinery of the Age of Absolutism.

It is impossible, at this point, to conceptualize the exercise of power in the old Hobbesian form: this classical theory was only made to account for a kind of sovereignty that was absolute and supreme. Michel Foucault, in noticing the lack of empirically accurate analytical models, attempted to understand power as *productive* instead of *destructive*. Foucault insisted that the old Hobbesian model should be abandoned in favor of a model that study’s the production of power outside of the juridical institutions of the State as we understand it in the classical model. Instead, ‘society’ becomes a modification of the sovereign. Modern societies still maintain the practices of the sovereign will of law, the mode of discipline, and rationalization towards productive efficiency. Societies still exercise the powers of the sovereign: The power to *take* life is retained, though it becomes administrated by the same rationalizing tendency that modernity brings. A new innovation, to account for new technologies and the new social consciousness of the West, was required.

**Optimization**

The sovereign continued to express itself in its original form, by exercising the power to *take* life, a right which is now diffused into various institutions including the legal system, the healthcare system, and the police; but, with the introduction of the scientific and technological advancements that spurred societal rationalization also came the state’s adoption of a second kind of power. This was the power to *give* life. As rationalization, scientific advancements, and technological innovations continued to increase the mastery of nature, the state deployed means by which things like reproduction, medical treatment, life expectancy, etc could be increasingly managed and regulated. The state acquires not only supreme power over the administration and management of death, but also “ensures, sustains, and multiplies life, putting life in order”. The sovereign power to *take* life remains, and is subordinated to the extreme end of state power, returning to the periphery of political philosophy. The state itself has shed the appearance of the leviathan, a gigantic beast of death and destruction, demanding submission in exchange for protection. Instead, the state itself has taken up the appearance of a new kind of divine figure, its administration of death and destruction now subordinated to the administration of life and production. This observable turn in behavior is perhaps the reason why many institutions which further the ends of the state are not seen as torturous or coercive, because their actions are buttressed with justification that state power moves towards administration, control, and betterment of life, even at the expense of destroying some things or taking some lives. The combination of the rights consciousness which swept over Europe in the wake of liberalism and the concern within a continually rationalizing society brought forth the necessity for new mechanisms which the state could administer both *giving* and *taking* life.

In tandem, the politics of life and death ensure the hegemony of the state. The dual paradigm of state power, at the moment, manifests itself in two ways: the rights to *take* and *give* life. If we understand this, then the following statement should cause no difficulty: Power is not merely affective, in the sense that it can modify, quantify, qualify, augment, or diminish a body’s capacity to act, but in the case of the state’s affection of individual bodies, affect, by means of its bringing life and directing production, also embodies its more common usage: to be moved emotionally. We understand then, that power is not merely force, coercion, or threat, but can also be compelling, joyful, bring us health or excitement.

**Discipline**

Before we move forward, it is necessary again to step back. Already, we have discussed sovereignty and societies which grow around notions of the sovereign mode of power. But, with all of the aforementioned scientific, technological, and cultural innovations experienced by the West in the age of the Industrial Revolution came the secondary effects of an emphasis on rationalization. In order to understand the effect which these innovations would have on society, we must understand the panopticon.

Foucault defines the panopticon in two ways: figuratively and technically. The panopticon is simply the notion of unseen surveillance. In his words, panopticism is the: “the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly

have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon.

Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment;

but he must be sure that he may always be so.”

This mode of power is highly effective. In deindividualizing power, the approach itself can be scaled to any particular size. Prisoners, workers, students, patients are all constantly “seeing” and “being seen”, and yet the ephemerality, or diffuseness, or multiplicity of such a technology also implies that the prison guards, the managers, the teachers, and the doctors are *themselves* inside of a panopticon. In a sense, panopticism is a “visual technology for creating order”. But, what does this look like?

Just as the sovereign’s power is both geographic and social, so to is the panoptic society’s mode of power both architectural and sensory. In the first way, the specific arrangement and characteristics of an enclosed space (the factory, the school, the prison, the theatre, the circus, the temple, the club, the arena etc) can be used to invoke the sense of surveillance while also masking the act or actor in surveillance. At all times, one feels as though one is being watch, and so (in a distinct departure from the regulatory power of the sovereign) the enclosed space, the diffuse state, and the encroaching society encourage self-regulation of behavior. Because of this notion of constant surveillance, the individual becomes alienated, under constant suspicion of his unverified, surveilled state. Crowds are discouraged, even destroyed. Foucault defines three behaviors that occur within “panoptic enclosures”, the main spaces and sources of order production within the disciplinary society.

The panopticon is not a building, but an illustration: it diagrams the ideal form of power, maximizing the number of controlled bodies and minimizing the number of bodies needed to maintain this control. The aim of the panopticon is to increase docility and utility, it is no coincidence that hospitals, prisons, schools, and factories all look and operate similarly: concerning themselves with affecting bodies and space through classification, conformity, efficiency, and controlling production. First, the panopticon creates a mechanism of coercion that relies on observation. Secondly, it creates a penal system where slight departures from “correct behavior” are punished. Abnormalities are created and applied, contrasted absolutely with normalcy and “the rules”. Disciplinary punishment declares itself to be reformative, creating a system of gratification and punishment that encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior. Something like a hierarchical system is created, whereby those who are more normal are promoted in rank and those who are abnormal are demoted in rank. Thirdly, this kind of power does not destroy, take, or repress. Rather, it constructs, produces, and qualifies new realities and spaces, encouraging new behaviors, habits, and practices. The panopticon is the theoretical and applied technology of the disciplinary society.

**Usurpation**

Gilles Deleuze declares Foucault’s disciplinary to be “finished”, saying “the disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries … reach their height at the outset of the twentieth. They initiate the organization of vast spaces of enclosure. The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first the family, then the school, then the barracks, then the factory; from time to time the hospital, possibly the prison, the preeminent instance of the enclosed environment. It’s the prison that serves as the analogical model: at the sight of some laborers, the heroine of Rossellini’s Europa 51 could exclaim, “I thought I was seeing convicts!” With the completion of the disciplinary society came Foucault’s acknowledgement of the transience of the model and moved on to the study of biopower.

Deleuze, on the other hand, states that, by the time of World War II when many disciplines were in crisis, “new forces” were gradually instituted and these rapidly accelerated. He declares that, by this time, “we already no longer were, what we had ceased to be”. In noticing a crisis in relation to “all environments”, Deleuze uptakes the task of recognizing these new mechanisms of control that are “equal to the harshest of confinements”. In a new, unfamiliar age overlooked by a new regime of state power, Deleuze reminds us that, “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons”.

**Mechanism**

There are a few key components central to enclosures, the primary panotic technology: firstly, they are independent spaces, secondly, they suppose an individual to start from zero, and third, they hold a common analogical language. We’ve already spoken about the latter, so we should direct our focus to the first two qualities. As independent spaces, enclosures are independent variables, they can change and modify, sometimes falling out of central control. This is one impediment panoptic technologies face in achieving absolute efficiency. In starting an individual from zero, as an individual moves from one enclosed space to the next, from school to barracks and from barracks to factory, an individual is deformed and reformed into a distinctive casting dictated by the enclosed space. Inefficiency is obvious here, if enclosed spaces are independent and distinct, but act like moldings and casts, then between enclosures there will always be a space where molds do not fit, casts do not secure.

Whereas the mode of the sovereign was like a solid (absolute, indivisible, and impenetrable), and mode of discipline like liquid (nonconstant, adaptive, and enveloping), Deleuze likens a new, approaching mode to a gas or a spirit (modulating, operational, perpetual). He points to an assemblage system (a concept which deserves its own video) within the modern corporation. The factory, which was already familiar with the bonus system, is usurped by the corporation, which works “more deeply to impose a modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions”. He mocks “idiotic television game shows”, observing that their success derives from how accurately they express the corporate situation. Whereas in the factory, the panoptic “management”, or “front office”, was concerned with surveying elements individually within a mass and alienating and isolating individuals from a multitude, the corporation encourages healthy rivalry, “a motivational force that opposes individuals against one another and runs through each, dividing each within”. Meritocratic praises fuel the division of individuals: educators compete for tenure, students for placement, and coworkers for bonuses. Corporations replace factories, perpetual training replaces school, and prerequisites replace examinations.

In a society of discipline, individuals were thought of in two ways. Because of the independent nature of enclosed spaces, contextuality arises as a means of differentiation within an enclosed space. An individual can transition between enclosed spaces, as so is referred to as a signature. But, in an independent, enclosed space, that individual is also designated by an administrative numeration, a number or rank, simply put. This designates the position within the enclosed space occupied by the signature, positions within closed spaces do not transfer between one another, but are always limited to the enclosure.

A society of control, on the other hand, presents a new and pernicious kind of designation. Neither signature nor administrative numeration are important. Like a spirit, societies of control leak through enclosures, refusing to remain contained within panoptic, enclosed spaces. The merger of the individual signature (the person) with all applicable administrative numerations (all classifications that individual signature signifies in all enclosed spaces) occurs. In short, individuals become “dividuals”. Still existing in enclosed spaces, the individual now also exists “as a mass, a sample, data, markets, or banks”.

Whereas the panopticon creates a mechanism of coercion through the sense of enclosure and constant surveillance, the control society creates a mechanism that “gives position to any element within an open environment at any given instant”. Felix Guattari imagined a situation in which a person could swipe an electronic card (an identifier) to raise a given barrier. Deleuze notes that what matters is whether or not the electronic card always works, but that there is always a computer ready to track the swipe. “What counts is not the barrier, but the computer that tracks each person’s position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation”. Nodding to Foucault, Deleuze muses over this insidious quality as seen in architecture:

“Control is not discipline, you do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control. People can travel infinitely and “freely” without being confined wile being perfectly control”.

The insidious quality of the control society is that it feels freeing at times. Whereas the sovereign *takes* life, and discipline *gives* life, controls *define* life. These mechanisms can appear to increase or ease mobility and the perception of freedom, progress, or benefit while ultimately creating a metastable system that is far less free than appears. New ways of qualifying, quantifying, augmenting, diminishing, directing, encouraging, defining, creating, and destroying all appear in this new space of control. He lists several examples of the ways in which control societies express a new system of domination: in the school system, automated management, placement, through codes such as standardized test scores, household income, location, etc; in the healthcare system, particularly in regards to the evaluation, repression, and incarceration of the socially unfit or undesirable within the field of psychiatry; Deleuze encourages us to use these small examples to extrapolate further as this society inevitably grows. The financial system, social media, advertising, and propaganda are all technologies found at their most contemporary expression in societies of control. The age of information ushers in a new emphasis on the automated maintenance of the metastability that allows control systems to simultaneously give more access and less freedom. Control systems function via encouraging increased use of access points as a means to acquire environmental feedback (data) and respond in each individual case with new, directed access points. In the environment of constant movement through access points, the literal equating of movement with data, the control society seeks to modulate itself to steer individuals in predictable, controllable directions. Consent is neither required nor relevant, any engagement or data given to this particular system will result in controlled direction within the system. Force is never applied in control societies, rather feedback is used to “steer and adjust behavior”, your code places you into a particular demographic, whether it be an advertising base or a risk category. Your continuously refined code is always being used to direct a dividual in a given direction. These societies have the power to *define* life. They preconfigure access points and create increasingly divergent realities. Deleuze notes that “many young people strangely boast of being ‘motivated’; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training. Its up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve, just as their elders discovered. The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill”.