

Jacques Ellul

LUST FOR POWER

The first thing we must realize is that the lust for power is not purely subjective. Neither is it a wholly moral nor psychological nor sociological matter: the desire to exploit and dominate others is not peculiar to one category or class (be they the wicked, bourgeoisie, capitalists, or imperialists). Such a view misses the point entirely. In fact the whole matter of lust for power revolves about the union and the interpenetration of objective systems, the accumulation of means whose very power is the logic of the means themselves. At the same time of course it includes the people who make up the system and acquire a subjective or class-based lust for power by the system or its methods. For example: a man owns a car. At face value the car is but an instrument. If he goes too fast or drives dangerously it is his fault and his alone: he is certainly free to do otherwise. The driver possesses a sense of power which he submits to in favor of automobile and speedometer, which in turn can take him to 90 or 100 mph. And, this man is a member of a society which thrives on records, speed and the economy of time—where spectators get highs at raceways, and the media are filled with all sorts of speed records. Consequently, our driver is less than completely free in the way he drives his car.

Secondly, one might say that power in itself is indifferent; it can be used for good or evil; it is part of social reality. Then there is authority—a positive idea, because power seems at one and the same time regulated by institutions and recognized as power by everyone. There is also force, which more often has a negative

connotation—the domination of one by another by violence. I believe, however, these distinctions are far too simple and inexact when considering the reality of these phenomena we are considering. Authority as well as power contains force, domination, and (to a point) violence. There is no such thing as an authority that is pure, objective, serene, freely approved. All authority—psychic, charismatic, or functional—is necessarily linked with force, that is, with some constraint and repression. In the same way there is no such thing as objective, neutral power. All power is tied to the exercise of force and, therefore, to constraint, and sometimes to violence. There is no constitutional change that can transform the organization of force into “morally pure” authority. Spiritual change or moralizing cannot make a system of force into a simple instrument for the service of mankind. Thus there is a certain amount of contamination among these realities of power, force, and authority.

Having said this, we must point out that the structures of power are diverse: there is the power of money to which we are perhaps the most sensitive, what with all the denunciations leveled against it by liberals, socialists, and humanists. But political power is no less unknown in our world. Indeed, we find ourselves, willy-nilly, between at least two systems of power. For some the power of money is the most abominable and has corrupted everything. They think it necessary to create a popular state, free of the power of money, one that is untainted and able to make guarantees to its citizens. For others, the greatest danger lies in *political totalitarianism*, the omnipotence of the State. In this case the first goal is to fight dictatorship, to promote the concerns of the people, to preserve liberty. Of course there will be abuses and the power of money may take over, but this would be a lesser evil. In addition to these two objective forms of power, however, there is the power of science and *technique*. This, too, is pure domination. It represents a system; that is, technique,

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too, is subject to its own proper laws. Technique necessarily implies domination, force, total efficiency; it cannot be otherwise.

Now in these three cases, it is necessary to remember that money has its power *in itself*, as do the State and technique. It is not a matter of choice at all—it is a matter of the intrinsic logic of the systems. The only utopian possibility is simply to pass from one to the other while pretending to be free. But in all three cases, we have independent processes which necessarily produce either an accumulation of money or the growth of State domination or the geometric increase of technological efficiency. Like it or not, this is the law under which these systems operate. Then, of course, the systems meet up with the thirst for power, the desire to dominate. It is here, at the meeting of factors organically independent and qualitatively different, that we find the *real* problem of power today.

When a man who wanted to lord it over others had at his disposal only the rudimentary armaments of the Middle Ages, his ability to dominate was necessarily limited. He did not find himself caught up by considerations of the contemporary means for action we have been discussing for the simple reason that they were limited means. But as methods of power became less limited, they took on an autonomy that proportionately increased man's ability to dominate other men—this happened without man being aware that he had made a clear choice to dominate. Today, however, the so-called objective attitude of the technologist, or even the neutral attitude of the politician who makes a choice for a variety of given objectives, is in reality only a veil disguising a real penchant for power. The greater the methods of power, the less the concern about aggression in employing them. Hand to hand combat requires making faces, crying out, and gesticulating to frighten the enemy. Pushing a button at an atomic missile console can be done without disturbing one's cool, for this is simply a response to a technical calculation, and has nothing to do with conscience. There is neither aggression nor hatred in pushing the button. This characterizes the transformation of force in our society: it simply reduces the rational, passionate, and existential reality to a mere exercise in technique.

Therein lies the advantage. We are promised a transition from the political realm to the administrative realm. We move from the political craving to dominate and manipulate to a cold, impersonal mode of behavior that seems the very guarantee of non-domination. We pretend to eliminate the individual's personal decision to dominate through the simple use of mechanical

efficiency. In reality, this is more an expression of the spirit of power than technological objectivity. It is essential to technique to increase in power. But the one who uses technique is not simply a robot: he himself is invested with power and can recognize the possibilities of his actions. Consequently, he proceeds under the pretext of scientific objectivity to give free rein to his lust for power in a new way: he is not a tyrant but a "technologist who exercises power," even if no technocratic organization exists in the narrow sense of the term. Thus increase of power comes about in our society by the union of the *means* of exercising force with the spirit of power. Bit by bit, absolute efficiency is achieved in an objective and impersonal way, without passion, without feeling.

The above considerations are necessary to evaluate the effects of power in our contemporary world not only outside the traditional categories of good and evil but beyond analyses that are purely psychological. The first obvious question is whether power can be used for The Good. This is the position of those who, for example, favor dictatorship to assure man's well-being: if just, virtuous, wise men exercise absolute power, they will lead humanity towards well-being and The Good. However, this presents two difficulties. We must always remember that power tends to run wild. From the moment any system of power has been set in motion, power is never satisfied with itself. This means that, on the one hand, the power at hand is always considered insufficient to achieve the great objectives envisioned by power. It is always necessary to augment power with the conviction that tomorrow one will finally have the means to realize the original vision and the man with these ideas never betrays a lack of power. On the other hand, power which has increased in the immediate past cannot restrain its own growth. On the contrary, it necessarily continues in the same direction. In the primary accumulation of power is both the condition and also the necessity of further acquisition of power. For example, it is explained that when an economic system has a growth rate of 5 percent per annum over ten years, a growth rate of 0 percent cannot occur; the system is economically and technologically condemned to follow the growth rate for a sufficiently longer period of time. The principle of power thus tends towards the unlimited. There is no limit for power other than that which it *can* effectively accomplish in time, but it does not cease wanting to surpass this limit of pure "temporal impotence," in order to be able finally to accomplish that which yesterday seemed inaccessible.

However, the principle of unlimited growth poses a decisive problem: can there exist values in a society which are subordinate to unlimited growth? I invoke

that famous statement of Talleyrand, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." (And in the same vein is the profound analysis of Jünger in *The Glass Bee*, where he shows that the growth of power necessarily and inevitably leads to the destruction of values.)

If values exist, there exist as well areas that power cannot reach—not because power is "weak," but by the very nature of reality. Consequently, power is always subject to judgment, for there exists a reality which cannot be judged by power. Without these two conditions, there are no values. But these are the very conditions which power (be it money, the State, science, or technique) cannot tolerate. How could there be anything inaccessible to power? This would be precisely the area which power must designate and control. It is precisely the source of values and their development which interests all power, for power is never content to exist in a neutral situation. Power as power needs more and more proof, declaration, and recognition that it is good and just and proper and lawful. It is the very nature of power to want to be all things. Power is never content with a mere exercise of power.

How could independent values ever sit in judgment on power? Power cannot tolerate judgments, because that would suppose a power beyond, and in fact, greater, than itself. Power and those who exercise power cannot interpret anything except in terms of power. For those dedicated to the pursuit of power, judgments are possible only because of the superior power of the judge. The mechanism of the growth of power is inevitably a destroyer of moral and spiritual values, no matter what group, no matter what society. (See the admirable book by H. Boll, *The Sacrament of the Bull*)

We must also consider the problem from another point of view. Power necessarily implies the subordination of man. Power always works against man as well as nature and objects. When power is exercised it is inevitable that this power be used against others. It makes little difference whether the minority suppresses the majority or vice versa. Tocqueville has shown that the dictatorship of the majority is just as terrible as the dictatorship of the minority. *He* is right, not Marx. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not made legitimate by the number of its supporters. The masses or the mob which exercise power is as radically evil as the dictator. (The name of the demon is "legion".) Moreover, when power works on man, the inevitable result is a radical one: man becomes a thing, he is objectified (which is quite a different status than "alienation"). Power works on man as its just and proper victim. Therefore it can lead him, manipulate him, and transform him; it can strip him of his humanity to make him simply a

function, or at best an adjunct of power. Man so transformed will give power a rein to its full capabilities. Power has no respect for man, for that would be a contradiction in terms. Power which would consider each man as an individual, which would be mindful of his value and sense of life—such a power would cease to be power. The courts, since their invasion by psychology and psychoanalysis, have in reality given up judgment: as soon as the accused becomes an individual whose behavior can be explained and whose face is the expression of a complex story, it is impossible to condemn him. Power loses its very reality, for the reality of power is the negation of humanity in the ones who exercise it as well as in those over whom it is exercised. This is the drama of Hegel's master and slave.

In these conditions, the real problem in maintaining the possibility of human life in society is how to limit power. We would seem to have three possibilities. The first I call the conventional limitations of power, namely, law and constitution. Whoever has power obeys the law and agrees to abide by certain limitations. This is the whole theory behind the democratic liberal state: the principle of the division of power. But in reality this is ineffectual in practice: this system works in so far as whoever holds power accepts it and indeed goes along with it. The extreme weakness of the constitutional theory is that political power itself makes the constitution. Thus at its own will (in spite of referenda), power can change from one constitution (when it becomes troublesome) to another. (We have seen this in France since 1793). Second: if law has its source in the State, it is evident that the State is a limit to power only to the degree tolerated by power. Power has only to change the rules of law to remove limits to itself. (The work of Hans Kelsen not only identifies these principles, but spells out their consequences.) If law is founded on something other than the State, then the State will not rest until its power seizes the source of law and makes law nothing more than an instrument of the State itself. Third: the weakness of Montesquieu's theory of "the balance of power": the legislature acts as a balance to the executive branch and the judiciary acts as a balance and control to the other two. But if the three powers are integrated into one ensemble—the ensemble of the State—they cannot balance each other. A simple reorganization of the State can neutralize either or both of these powers—and who would stand in the way of such a reorganization?

And this leads us to a second point: balances, law, constitutions, etc., can be a safeguard in the face of power only if they have their foundation in something

other than the organism of power. If law is *created in the manner of a custom*, is it independent of the State and a genuine obstacle to power. If judiciary power is implanted in an autonomous social group (for example, the Parliaments and the bourgeoisie in France in the 18th century), it cannot be destroyed by the State. On the contrary, it is actually the social group which holds the State's reins. In other words, for power to be limited it must encounter obstacles having their source and reality in independent, autonomous social groups which can deliver resistance. This obstacle must be exterior to the organism of power and cannot simply be moral rule, ideal, or constitution. The reality of these obstacles to power must be deeply rooted. The Church, for example, until the seventeenth century was a real obstacle in the face of the autocratic inclinations of monarchs and States.

For democracy to live, it is not sufficient that its formal, democratic rules be legalized. Rather, it is necessary that there exist within the social body a group, community or organization which issues childlike challenges against the government in power, and identifies and thereby confronts the structure of power itself, the aims, the bureaucratic tendencies, the technological systems, etc. This is the *only* true counter-to-power. But we must be careful, at just this juncture. If the goal of our counter to power is simply the conquest of power, the replacement of one regime by another, it is nothing. Worse, it is nothing more than a new incarnation of the spirit of power, as, for example, are Communist parties everywhere. A true counter to power neither seeks power nor seeks to destroy the system in power. Rather it seeks to produce in society a zone of uncertainty, to introduce contingent factors, to throw a wrench into an all too perfect, all too efficient machine. Any counter to power necessarily aims at reducing efficiency, introducing tensions, troubles, uncertainties, "fading," etc.—and this not from malice but simply from the recognition and conviction that if power is not obstructed, it obeys its own laws. The idea of a counter to power, of course, does not imply pure spontaneity, but rather recognized opposition.

All this said, this idea of a counter to power is not wholly satisfactory. It will lead, inevitably, to a conflict. The dominant power will seek to destroy, assimilate, absorb or recover the counter to power which cannot be tolerated indefinitely. There are then only two results: either the counter to power augments itself and thereby enters the cycle of other growing powers; or, it abandons its current form and seeks other bases, other expressions, other principles, and reorganizes itself. It changes its battlefield, front, and appearance. This is the only satisfactory response, but—and there is no need to hide it—it is extremely difficult to realize. (I

have discussed these points in detail in my *Autopsy of Revolution*.)

But there is an even more radical possibility: the deliberate choice of "non-power," the rejection of all forms of power whatever they may be and no matter how legitimate they are. "Non-power" obviously goes much further than non-violence or opposition to war. Non-power is a radical rejection of the more "normal" tendencies in man—aggression, reacting to violence with violence, the rule of an eye for an eye and *all* the values and institutions of our society, in particular the economic organization, the ideas of competition that life is a battle which the best man wins. As long as we preserve this ideology we are inevitably preparing for the advent of communist or fascist dictatorship and their technostuctures. Of course, we must not fall into the trap of idealism—that is, we must not hope that any future society could exist with an ethic of total non-power. There is no need to devote ourselves to an anarchistic utopia.

In our day, and in our society which has chosen power, there must be an unceasing and uncompromising rejection of power. We, the small but indispensable voice of dissent, must choose *non-power*. We are indispensable, because if our affirmation is not grasped and lived by us, society is doomed. The witness of non-power (non-success/inefficiency, "failures," etc...) lives in truth by constantly questioning all the ideologies of society. It is neither the production of wealth nor the success of the means and systems of production, distribution and consumption, nor the political constructions of justice, which provide society with a future.

The future of our society rests upon the only free persons in our society. The witnesses to non-power are the only free persons around us, for those who are bent on power resist sociological change, especially as it effects them as individuals.

There is no other way. Indeed, this way holds greater implications and possibilities than one might think; there are hidden and profound implications for all of us.