



On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth

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Documenting the process by which government and controlling majorities have grown increasingly powerful and tyrannical, Bertrand de Jouvenel demonstrates how democracies have failed to limit the powers of government. This development Jouvenel traces all the way back to the days of royal absolutism, which established large administrative bureaucracies and thus laid the foundation of the modern omnipotent state.

On Power is an important work that Professor Angelo M. Petroni of the Luigi Einaudi Center for Research in Torino, Italy, has said is "simply a book that no serious scholar of political science or political philosophy can afford to ignore."

Bertrand de Jouvenel was born in Paris in 1903; he traveled widely, becoming an astute observer of British and American institutions. Later in life, he was an author and teacher, first publishing *On Power* in 1945. Jouvenel died in 1987. Among his other books, besides *The Ethics of Redistribution*, are *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good* (1957) and *The Pure Theory of Politics* (1963).

On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth Details

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Tim Pendry says

Originally published in 1945, this remarkable book was possibly the clearest analysis of the nature of Power (always capitalized by De Jouvenel) since Machiavelli's account of the reality of politics in Renaissance Italy.

It is of its time. De Jouvenel was clearly stunned at the ability of post-dynastic state machines to mobilise national resources and populations for total war. The 'tyrannical' Louis XIV (there is a French cultural focus to the book) could not have dreamed of such power.

The thesis is a surprisingly simple one - that Power (meaning concentrated state power) strengthens itself through the revolutionary defeat of aristocratic republicanism and that its alliance with each rising class in turn strengthens its ability to command the resources of that class.

This is not quite the positive interpretation of successive revolutionary successes that the typical intellectual of the 1940s might have found easy to accept although it is perhaps easier to do so in the light of Communism. De Jouvenel has become a beacon for American libertarians.

But the message is not simply an implicitly anti-communist one. While Hitler and Stalin hover over the story, De Jouvenel's interest is really in the so-called liberal democratic States whose ability to enslave populations and thieve property has been no less than that of these tyrants.

His book is a paradigm-shifter, perhaps more so today, because what he is really saying is that every apparent rhetorical victory for the population in terms of rights, democracy and welfare has actually been a victory for ruling elites.

This is not to say that there have not been benefits - including the rule of law for everyone and welfare programmes - but that the 'deal' has been a dirty one with populations at large conscripted into death and slavery, even in Roosevelt's America, with scarcely a protest.

I part company with De Jouvenel (though I suggest that his analysis in itself is unanswerable) only on his conservative pessimism (which I might share about our species but not necessarily about all future social and political forms). When he moves from an 'is' to an 'ought' he is less convincing.

His attachment to aristocratic republicanism, whether Roman or eighteenth century British, may represent more freedom for men who do not come under the gaze of the aristocrat than that offered by the State but petty oppressions, security and welfare do provide a reason for voluntary enslavement.

He is not insensitive to the fact that welfare needs and the bad conduct of aristocrats help drive the rise of State power even if it is clear that populations will die (perhaps in a state of 'false consciousness') to preserve this Faustian bargain - an improved degree of protection and security.

Of course, we are in different times now but what De Jouvenel might have noticed is that, as States weaken under the global market system, so protection for the population weakens and that the increase in 'freedom' since the 1980s is matched by an increase in insecurity.

Security for the masses in return for blind compliance (with even intellectuals submitting to the myth of the democratic State) has been replaced across much of the West with security *for* the State *against* the masses.

This seems to be a slow reversion to eighteenth century conditions. States cannot enforce their desired theft of assets or conscript labour yet are both engaged in expensive and perpetual small wars and trying to reduce their obligations to the population, since they get few services in return.

The population at large thinks that it owns the State (this heir to dynastic accretion of power at the expense of fellow criminal warlords) but it does not and never did. The State is an interest in itself concerned solely with its own survival and is now genuinely worried about that survival.

One survival strategy is to pool power with other threatened bureaucracies in unwieldy and fundamentally flawed imperial bureaucracies like the European Union in the hope that democracy might be attenuated by scale and discontent moderated by judicial legalism and spending.

Another survival strategy is to try and scare the population into compliance with State authority through constant security scares and to encourage passivity with populist policies ('bread and circuses').

Yet another is to disengage the bulk of the population by treating political parties and NGOs as partners in Power so detaching them from the population at large. Activists, under this now dominant system, get a slice of the action in return for collaboration.

All these policies, in cultures used to personal freedom, that have access to social media that can by-pass official channels and have a decreasing sense of locality and ideology to bind them together, require funds and funds are becoming harder to find as taxation is resisted.

Moreover, people not merely died for Italy and Germany, they volunteered to die for Italy and Germany. Who will volunteer to die for the European Union? People volunteered to die for communism. Who will volunteer to die for liberal capitalism? No-one who is not an idiot is the answer.

The world of today is very different from that of De Jouvenel. States still have an immense monopoly of force which could create workable tyrannies but such methods would thrust such societies back into unsustainable economic models that would ultimately undermine States themselves.

Our problem is the very opposite. States are now faced with a revived warlordism at the margins – the very basis of aristocratic republicanism and 'freedom'. It is not stupid to consider Columbian and Mexican narco-gangsters or Al-Qaeda as the possible basis of functional states one day.

This book is highly recommended not so much for De Jouvenel's implicit prescriptions – somewhat desperate appeals to a religious (in the Roman sense) basis for society and better behavior and self restraint by elites – as for his cold and cruelly apposite analysis of the situation.

Although the analysis is of the situation of the West in the 1940s, the book makes it clear that what he is writing about is something much more 'eternal' about Power and its drive for self-advancement. There is something intrinsic to State Power that drives it to tyranny over men.

Undoubtedly, this is a conservative book and probably a pessimistic one but it can be read with profit by those who are not conservative. Authoritarian socialists and other ideologues won't give a damn and will continue to try to capture the State to enforce their ideology no matter what.

But libertarian Leftists would do well to understand that the State flips from solution to problem at a key point in the game and that the cost of socialist or Leftist policies becomes far too great at a certain cut-off

point in key personal freedoms, including State enslavement of labour value.

This does not mean accepting De Jouvenel's implied approval of the feudalism of Di Lampedusa's Prince of Salina. It does suggest that a libertarian Left should distrust the people that the 'Leopard' distrusted, rising men in revolutionary situations, to which he was happy to adapt.

History is the story of the little guys being screwed over and finding it increasingly difficult to hide from the military boot, the police spy and the tax collector. The fact that some of the cash might return in benefits later is of little joy if your son returns from the front in a coffin.

Perhaps there is some way of creating an aristocratic republicanism where everyone is an aristocrat, jealous of freedoms, prepared to defend their land by force but not steal another's, charitable, concerned with public order and egalitarian – admittedly a tall order given our species!

Vikas Erraballi says

Worth alone 10 of the others books I've read this year

Marion says

This is a book that everyone that wants to understand today's society should read...

Dyare says

information on power by de jovvnel

Alejandro Ferrés Bruyn says

Una lectura muy enriquecedora para comprender sobre los efectos del poder que no sólo se limita a lo estatal. Llama la atención que el autor sea liberal y que hable de un tema que apenas se limita a su negación dentro de la propaganda liberal.

Emanuel says

Quite detailed description of power as a concept and extremely knowledgeable understanding of its history. Just at a few times it was a bit too philosophical. However, I really enjoyed that everything was presented from an unbiased viewpoint.

Definitely recommend it.

Christopher says

A truly breathtaking narrative by an insightful and observant master of history. De Jouvenel wrote (in 1945) a thorough and carefully dissected biography of "Power," always identified as a proper noun, in its political form as that impersonal entity that irresistibly exists to feed and perpetuate itself.

The prose in much of the book is wonderful, making such a dense and somber topic very approachable:

“Command is a mountaintop. The air breathed there is different, and the perspectives seen there are different, from those of the valley of obedience. The passion for order and the genius for construction, which are part of man's natural endowment, get full play there. The man who has grown great sees from the top of his tower what he can make, if he so wills, of the swarming masses below him.”

The conclusions he arrives at are as timeless, *“Power changes its appearance but not its reality,”* as they are terrifying:

“We are ending where the savages began. We have found again the lost arts of starving non-combatants, burning hovels, and leading away the vanquished into slavery. Barbarian invasions would be superfluous: we are our own Huns.”

One of the most important books I've ever read and will likely give it a more thorough review after my second read.

Colm Gillis says

A powerful book with a great foreword. One can literally taste the era in which it was released, when Europe was in the height of turmoil. De Jouvenel offers a searing analysis of the dangers of Statism. The book is very enjoyable to read and his style is consistent throughout. At times, I thought it was a little too cynical of power and a little ahistorical.

José María Blanco White says

Casi 500 páginas de intenso debate interno, de indagación, sobre el origen y evolución del Poder y, por extensión del gobierno, del Estado, de las sociedades humanas y, finalmente, de la libertad. El lector vivirá la historia de las comunidades humanas de una manera intensa y crítica, siempre haciéndose preguntas, siempre intentando entender las motivaciones o los impulsos que provocaron que nuestros ancestros, y ahora nosotros, delegaran sus responsabilidades en otros seres o instituciones con el fin, supuesto, de proteger su vida, su seguridad, y en lo que cabe, conseguir una cierta calidad de vida. Y adoptar dichas decisiones a costa de su libertad. Dependiendo de cuánto valoren los individuos su libertad (parece un trasunto de Fausto vendiendo su alma a Mefistófeles) canjearán esta por la seguridad que puedan obtener a través de una relación siervo-señor feudal; amo-esclavo; o, como sucede hoy día en el moderno Estado Social Occidental: a través de un complicado entramado de dependencias sociales que equivalen en la práctica a un vasallaje a la antiguo usanza, y que impiden que el individuo -al menos el de carácter menos sanguíneo- pueda o quiera emanciparse de un Estado omnipotente que le acompaña desde la cuna a la tumba y que le regala los oídos al

modo, repito, del mismo Mefistófeles.

El libro no es el ladrillo que uno podría esperar por el tema y el volumen. Ciertamente que uno se encuentra a menudo con casos de esos y que vuelven reacios a los lectores que luego renegarán de volver a leer un libro en su vida que no sea pura ficción o demagogia electoral. Este libro es claro y a la vez intenso. Hace pensar continuamente. Cansa, pero porque no da respiro, no por aburrimiento. Las ideas no son fáciles de explicar, y Jouvenel lo consigue, sin llegar a la brillantez excelsa, pero sin decaer tampoco. Y son ideas, de lo que se habla. El protagonista es el Poder y, por implicación, la libertad individual.

El libro va desarrollando su argumento, planteando sus preguntas, aportando sus juicios e ilustraciones al hilo de la historia y de las ideas de pensadores que desde la Grecia clásica a la Revolución Inglesa y Francesa han afectado las vidas de los ciudadanos en relación al Estado. Al comienzo de la obra Jouvenel explica, y compartimos completamente, el motivo que le llevó a escribir este libro. Era 1945 cuando se publicó por primera vez. El autor no puede dejar de preguntarse cómo los individuos, la sociedad moderna de su tiempo, había podido llegar a tal extremo de indignidad moral, de degradación social, de servilismo con respecto al Poder. El Poder, en lo que había avanzado de siglo, eran los Totalitarismos: el Fascismo, El Nazismo, el Comunismo, y -como muy bien se veía ya en 1945 gracias a la estupidez de F.D. Roosevelt en América con su New Deal- el Welfare State: la firma que cierra el pacto final entre Mefistófeles y Fausto (estas alusiones literarias son mías).

Durante mi lectura he hecho muchos subrayados. Hay mucho en qué pararse y meditar. Y uno va entendiendo más y mejor la motivación y el asombro que llevó a Jouvenel a escribir este libro: ¿cómo es posible, por ejemplo, que un pueblo tan avanzado y culto como el alemán del primer tercio de siglo XX - quizás no haya habido nunca ni habrá otro tan culto en la historia- se haya dado a sí mismo un Estado Totalitario como el Nazi, un estado que si por algo se caracteriza es por su barbaridad, y no precisamente por su civilidad. No se trata de examinar la mente totalitaria o el Holocausto. No, este libro solo toma los totalitarismos modernos como referencia para adentrarse en la historia, para indagar en el alma humana y comprender qué hay en su naturaleza, desde su origen en una comunidad social primitiva hasta llegar a las sociedades políticas avanzadas de hoy día. Cómo han evolucionado esos Estados que se han dado las sociedades a sí mismas; cuáles eran las circunstancias por las que el hombre en unos momentos valoraba más su libertad que su seguridad y viceversa. La relación entre el Individuo y el Estado, ese es el tema de la obra: el individuo como sujeto pasivo de un Poder sobre el cual ha delegado parte (o el todo) de su responsabilidad; y ese Poder, el cual se arroba el derecho de decidir sobre la vida del Individuo y de exigirle a ese Individuo que obedezca en virtud del acuerdo pactado. Este pacto es prueba del desconocimiento del hombre de aquello que pacta, de que no sabe que en realidad ha firmado un papel en blanco. La tragedia -uno concluye tras la lectura del libro- es que el bienestar del hombre en los dos últimos siglos ha ido parejo al declive moral y espiritual que ha sufrido. Carente de referentes morales, de convicciones espirituales que le orienten a la hora de decidir qué es bueno y qué no lo es, el Estado se erige en la Iglesia moderna; el Estado asume ese puesto vacante. El hombre ha mirado a su alma, como Fausto lo hizo, y se ha preguntado ¿para qué me sirves? Ante el silencio como respuesta exterior el hombre no ha considerado necesario reservarse su alma, y todo juicio moral, toda la autoridad que antes había dejado en manos de un Ser de carácter Divino, ahora lo transfiere a uno llamado Estado, y que no es más que un conglomerado de intereses formado por hombres de carne y hueso como él. Su dejadez de responsabilidades ha provocado todos los males que le han aquejado a lo largo del siglo XX, desde el Holocausto al Gulag, al estabulamiento e idiocia de la juventud ni-ni actual. De Guttemberg a Twitter. Para acabar desaprendiendo a escribir nos podíamos ahorrar este viaje.

¿Es culpable el hombre o debemos echarle la culpa al Estado, que nos ha embaucado una vez más, a los intelectuales y filósofos, que con su labia y sus artes sofistas nos han encaminado por la senda del nihilismo y el materialismo? Jouvenel, como Rudolph von Ihering, a quien cita, lo tiene claro:

“Es cierto que el Romano es libre de hacer todo lo que quiera. Pero también lo es que tiene que soportar las consecuencias de sus actos [...] no importa que se haya equivocado, que le hayan engañado, o incluso

forzado: un hombre no se deja forzar: etiamsi coactus, attamen voluit. Es libre; pero si, distraído, imprudente o atontado, prometió pagar una determinada cantidad y no puede pagarla, se convierte en esclavo de su acreedor.”

Un hombre no se deja forzar. Ergo...

Andreia says

It is a fascinating mix of history sociology philosophy and dialectic analysis. All intelligent citizens should read and reflect on the ideas that Jouvenel challenges us with.

IMPERIVM says

The first fourth and third fourth of the book are quite interesting, touching on advanced questions of power and history, respectively.

Jouvenel asks why ideological systems intent on limiting power inevitably end up serving power, without going into great detail attempting to answer, which I found disappointing and hoped the book would mostly be about. Were the book to do that, I'd not only give it five stars, I'd consider it one of the best evolutionary/institutional books I've ever read. I'll continue my search for what works will explore that evolutionary/power/information problem, and inevitably write my own take.

In the third fourth of the book, Jouvenel describes the divergence of English and French culture, which helps explain the English and French revolutions, as well as the rise of the Anglosphere, and the two cultures' Roman parallels. It is a useful introductory exposition for newcomers, but not heavy on details as a history treatise would be.

The rest of the book Jouvenel spends talking about Power (which presently manifests as an administrative state), the Individual, and the breakdown of social institutions that used to intermediate the two, which is the characteristic feature of Modernity and the cause of the immense power the administrative state has. It is interesting to see how America is presently in the Gracchus phase of Rome.

These other parts of the book I'm sure are interesting and useful to newer reactionaries, but nothing super informative for veterans. I would consider the first fourth and third fourth parts of the book the reason to read this work, but even there they do not make this work very technically advanced. It'll be interesting when I find the appropriate reactionary political economy texts (or write them myself).

Doug Wardlow says

This remarkable book explains how sovereign power tends to accumulate and centralize in the state as governments become increasingly democratic until, reaching modernity, power has clothed itself with the name of the people and usurped even the place of God, destroying the rule of law and trampling all moral impediments to the will of demagogues and tyrants. I have read this book several times since I was introduced to it in 1998 or 99 by the late Prof. George Carey of Georgetown, a brilliant conservative political

philosopher. The book is dense with unique insights that become increasingly relevant with each passing year. If you value life, liberty and the rule of law--if you are concerned about the direction in which our country is moving with respect to the same--then please read this book.

BlackOxford says

When Conservatives Had Minds

Bertrand de Jouvenel is an example of a possibly extinct species - the thoughtful conservative. Like his North American fellow, William F Buckley, Jouvenel argued against the development of the post-war welfare state in France, not because he was racist, mean, lacked empathy or was unprincipled but because he distrusted the the state power necessary to create it. The evangelical right and their single issue politics killed off this kind of intelligent argument. We all suffer as a result.

“Power,” Jouvenel says, *“possesses some mysterious force of attraction by which it can quickly bring to heel even the intellectual systems conceived to hurt it.”* What more compelling practical example could there be of this maxim than the election of Donald Trump? His claim to ‘drain the swamp’ of the Washington power-elite has of course resulted in the establishment of a new, more powerful elite, with less political conscience and humanity than has ever been seen in the United States.

Jouvenel’s target was power not the welfare state. This is what made him a conservative rather than a right-winger. He would have been just as concerned with a Republican Trump or Reagan as with a Democratic Obama or Roosevelt. It is a patent fact of political life that any significant governmental or social change demands a consolidation and concentration of additional political power in the hands of those managing the change. Once acquired such power is rarely relinquished short of a revolution. And power leads to many worse things than inequality - large-scale killing for example.

“The extension of power,” Jouvenel says, *“is responsible for the extension of war.”* No religion has ever asked for the sacrifices demanded by the modern nation-state. The creation of the nation-state itself required a degree of concentration of sovereign power such that these sacrifices could be enforced if they weren’t voluntarily forthcoming. This sacrifice is mitigated by the emotional bond of oppression that finds its most articulate expression in warfare, one of the now routine universal demands of the nation-state. *“Savagery in act,”* Jouvenel points out, *“is sustained by savagery in feeling.”* Patriotism is the pot in which such feeling is brought to the boil. The result of course is *“total militarisation of whole societies.”* And few think it odd.

The political implication is clear but difficult to digest in democratic society: if possible do not undertake any radical change without a way to de-concentrate power as quickly as possible after you’ve made it. The fact is, however, that power likes to hide in plain sight: *“... masked in anonymity it claims to have no existence of its own and to be the impersonal and passionless instrument of the General Will.”* We all therefore *“have a wide complicity in the extension of power.”* We want it, we get it, and we want to keep it. *“Force alone can establish power, habit alone can keep it in being.”* The Achilles heel of democratic societies.

Among medieval philosophers and theologians, the primary issue was how to control power. Contrast that with today in which the focus on what is necessary to compel obedience to power in corporate and political life. Jouvenel makes a profound observation, almost as an aside, that I find particularly enlightening. The medieval, and subsequently Calvinist, doctrine of predestination has always baffled me. Why would such a doctrine of arbitrary divine power be so attractive? It appears inhumane, heartless, even ruthless, and incompatible on the face of it with the ideals of Christian love and forgiveness.

The answer, Jouvenel suggests, is that predestination is in fact a condemnation and warning about the essential evil of power in the hands of human beings. Power will always be abused, the more powerful the person who wields it the more abuse will be inflicted. A sort of radicalisation of Lord Acton's 'absolute power corrupts absolutely.' In other words, there is no transcendent principle behind power that justifies its use. Power is not from God as the monarchists and even modern democrats hold. Power is only God's and human beings should not presume on it. This is the motive and message of predestination according to Jouvenel.

I find this message attractive. Power is not something that flows out of some divine source, imaginary or not, and then cascades down a hierarchy, diminishing in strength as it goes. Power is created continuously, almost always selfishly, from below. It's creation is obscured from view because we seem mesmerised by "*the basic hypothesis that brought Sovereignty [of the nation-state] to birth: that men are the reality and society a convention.*" How times have changed. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher destroyed this kind of conservatism by simply reversing the terms in Jouvenel's axiom.

Stewart says

My gateway drug to anarchism.

Abu Dhabi says

Pretty good. Not easy to read, but filled with insight on the nature of government and systems of authority.
