

# The impulse of power

Deepanshu Mohan believes a wider mainstream understanding of power, in its evolutionary forms, studied from the lens of history and sociology, warrants a deeper scholarly reflection

In a book first published in 1938 titled *Power*, Bertrand Russell, one of the most influential public intellectuals of 20<sup>th</sup> century, offered an intriguing analysis of human nature expressed in terms of power in its various forms. In finding the key to human nature, what Karl Marx found in wealth and Sigmund Freud found in sex; Russell in this book, finds in power. The law of social dynamics, even in today's times can attach fundamental importance to the understanding of power, its existential forms in different societies while temporality may affect its very nature in dynamically evolving societies.

While practical problems of power relations in our modern world today remain largely bounded in a quest for acquiring more wealth and economic power, the rationale for this is largely explained by founders of modern economic and political theories. For Russell, the facts and principles of economics and classical political prudence help him in conceptualizing an inter-disciplinary historical, social analysis on the evolution of power and its role play in multiple forms.

The article seeks to revisit some of Russell's own assertions on human impulse to power and its social analysis, further highlighting its existential structure in governing the law of social dynamics present today. In attempting this, I present here a brief analysis on the nature and forms of human power, the need to study its existence in both individual and collective forms and their reflection today.

### **The impulse**

So, in a social context, what may psychologically drive the human impulse to power? As Russell (1938) puts it, "*Imagination is the goad that forces human beings into restless exertion after their primary needs have been satisfied*". Xerxes, while embarking upon the Athenian expedition did not lack food or any primary source of comfort in tangible form. While animalistic desires tend to be satisfied by meeting basic survival and reproductive needs; human desire, driven by a love of power and recognition through imagination, often tends to perpetually expand and remain

boundless, being incapable of absolute satisfaction. Such an impulse to power in humans remains limited only by what their imagination suggests as possible.

Orthodox economics, attributes the pursuit of economic self-interest as an ultimate goal, explaining the choices made by rational beings. Such utilitarian conceptualization of self-interest maximizing actions of 'rational' beings may not holistically explain the motives of our actions. As the material desire for commodities, when separated from a social analysis of power and glory, remains finite and can be satisfied by a moderate competence. The partial incompleteness in psychologically explaining motivations for most human actions warrants a deeper study on causal factors shaping the impulse or love for power in humans.

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Possessiveness - the feeling of passion to have and hold - has often remained the ultimate source of war demonstrating political power. In today's techno-dynamic age, information on countless choices made available for consumption in daily lives tend to only expand the strength of such passion. A great deal of sociological scholarship already attributes the vice of power, greed and glory in both aspects of political and economic forms, to capitalistic ambitions and the tyranny of the employer.

One may argue that by diminishing the strength of possessiveness, as a passion and its hold upon our daily lives, some form of an alternative system can bring longer contentment to mankind. However, the attempt to treat the social accumulation one form of power, say wealth in this case, can only be partially successful. Lessons from history can teach us more on the social distribution of power in different societies and about the diversity of power in various functional forms.

### **Concentration of power**

Traditionally, most of economic and political power across countries often remained vested in families (invoking dynasty rule). The enduring power of families in business, economics and politics troubled believers in meritocracy. Classical liberal theories (since 18<sup>th</sup> century) proposed a break away from such forms of power vested in aristocracies, dynasties or hereditary monarchies to promote social cooperation and meritocracy through democracy.

Even **today**, more than 90% of the world's businesses are family managed or controlled (including big names like Volkswagen, News Corp). The founders of modern political and economic theory will find it surprising how kinship has somehow found itself enduring where political dynasties (from the likes of Clintons, Bushes in the US, Gandhis in India etc.) have a powerful mixture of 'brand names and personal connections'.

So, political and economic power today (amongst individuals or a group) doesn't work in isolation and bears a strong correlative social relationship for the modern state, which seems to have only been enhanced by technological advancements. A concept of techno-social power has emerged today, as an additional form of power, practiced through a given state's dominance of media and use of propaganda. Propaganda, if it can create an almost unanimous opinion through media (in existing sub-forms of social, print and electronic media), can generate an irresistible power for a leader or dominant collective group.

### **Beyond leaders and followers...**

Traditionally, the human impulse to power is seen in two forms: one, explicit in leaders and other, implicit in followers. As Russell argues, *"when men willingly follow a leader, they do so with a view to the acquisition of power by the group which he commands, and they feel that his triumphs are theirs..."*

In a modern liberal world design, such traditional leader-follower morality (or what Nietzsche calls as 'slave-morality') has transitioned itself into a new collective form; where individuals, in most societies may democratically seek a leader or political group that safeguards their basic freedoms, rights while allowing them the space to pursue their individual love of power and glory.

The impulse to submission which is as real as the impulse to command tends to have its roots in fear and when collective fear is driven away ie. there is no war or collective threat to a nation state, the love of power may be realized at extremely high margins. While such love of power may produce diverse set of negative externalities via rapid environmental degradation, collective greed, cut-throat market competition etc. some may also argue that absolute collective power and love for it may not necessarily be a bad thing.

As AA Berle and GC Means argue in their book *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, "Absolute power is useful in building the organization. More slow, but equally sure, is the development of social pressure demanding that the power shall be used for the benefit of all concerned. This pressure, constant in ecclesiastical and political history, is already making its appearance in the economic field". Thus, economic power (evident from rapid industrialization), unlike military power, is not primary but derivative.

### **Law of social dynamics**

In physics, the analytical importance attributed to the study and transmission of energy and matter explain most physical concepts; similarly, in social sciences we can attach a similar weight of importance to the study of power, its forms, the motivations driving its impulse and love for it amongst humans. Power like energy, in governing dynamics of social structures may continually pass from one form to another and any attempt to isolate any one form of it may qualify as an error of omission.

The State today is more powerful than any individual and is controlled largely by different set of political organizations or groups. In a state, where no social institutions such as aristocracy or hereditary monarchy exist, there remains no limit to the number of humans who can desire or acquire power. In such a social system, where access to power may be open to all, the competition for any posts of power will be between people, competing in terms of their power-loving capacities.

Thus, the collective love of power and its social distribution amongst humans becomes a metric of assessment for individuals competing in such a group. Something which we see happening across the world today. The advance of Technology through internet and other tools facilitating informational availability has advanced to the extent of socially embedding itself at high levels, which exponentially increases the desire for greater economic (and in turn

political) power. And there is no end to demonstrating such love of power (whether in economic, political or military form), unless in a social context, individuals may willingly submit themselves to anyone else ie. a leader.

The invisible force reflected in an individual's love of power may leave her/him discontent for most of the times, as no threshold level of power-loving achievement may be enough. Collectively, an expressed love of power may account as a useful force for driving people out of economic misery as a group, while they remain under social pressure to demonstrate their impulse for power to survive in a group. One may even attribute this interpretation, nature of collective power as some applicable form of social Darwinism.

### **To conclude**

In the reflection offered here, for a start, an atomistic importance of power in any social context deserves greater attention by social scientists present across the spectrum. While a great amount of inter-disciplinary work emerging in scholarships of economic sociology, economic history, political economy, economic anthropology etc. seeks to do this; a wider mainstream understanding of power, its evolutionary forms, studied from the lens of history and sociology warrants a deeper scholarly reflection and application in other social sciences. ■

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