Russell’s Power

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In his account of power, Bertrand Russell combines a perverse psychological thesis about a will to power for its own sake with an acute perception of different forms power takes. The psychology is that of the most brutal leaders of the 1930s, when Russell wrote. His account focuses on the power of a political leader to compel a following as Hitler, Stalin, and others did. But the strength of his account is its analysis of three distinct forms of power: one grounded in resources, such as weapons, and the others grounded in the coordination of large numbers of people, either by the force of ideas or by the force of institutional arrangements. In his sharpest arguments, Russell applies his coordination account to the difficulties individuals face in controlling democratic governments.

A PERIOD PIECE

Through much of his life and in many contexts, Bertrand Russell was concerned with power. His most extensive treatment of it is, of course, in his 1938 book, Power. Russell defined three essentially denotative categories, which are framed in relatively abstract terms. These are traditional, revolutionary, and naked power. Traditional power includes kingly power and priestly power (chaps. 4 and 5). Revolutionary power works against traditional power through persuasion (p. 27). Naked power usually is just military power, and it works through coercion (chap. 6). Hence traditional and revolutionary power both work through assent, naked power through coercion.

Despite the space given to this set of categories, it is clear that Russell’s purpose was not so much the analysis of power per se as the

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criticism of societies in which power relations often are corrosive. There is an additional problem with his analysis in that it is narrowly about the power that a government uses to control its subjects. In treating it this way, Russell reduced the problem of power to one of psychology in the impulses to power and to submission (chaps. 1 and 2). He asserted that the urge to power is universal; it is “insatiable and infinite”—“hence the need of morality to restrain anarchic self assertion.” The chief “desires of man” (perhaps here “man” is not a gender-neutral term) are “the desires for power and glory” (p. 8). For example, Russell supposed that vast fortunes are to be explained not by a craving for material prosperity but by a craving for power. One might call this a theory of power, but it is merely a factual psychological claim that surely is false. It is therefore a bad foundation on which to build a social theory.

Russell’s dreadful psychology seems to be under the sway of Nietzsche’s Will to Power. But then so was the period in which his book was written, with Franco, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, the Japanese fascists, and others seeming to be straight from Nietzsche’s vision. The book is a period piece, although Russell said similar things in other periods. Russell’s account is almost entirely about the problem of willful power mongers and only occasionally about the problems with power that are most important in many societies, including the liberal democratic societies that he discussed at some length.

Within his generally unanalytical treatment of power, Russell occasionally made insightful analyses that are not clearly related to this psychology of power. The best of these is his account of the correlative phenomenon of being subject to political and economic power in the modern world. Russell noted, as eventually Joseph Schumpeter and Anthony Downs came to see in their accounts of how democracy works in a large state, that individual participants—owners and citizens—have little impact on large-scale decisions concerning their own control over firms or the economy. He noted that individual shareholders in privately held firms and citizens who formally oversee nationally held firms typically have no interest in attempting to influence decisions that will affect their interests greatly (pp. 194-95). This problem can be generalized in what is called the logic of collective action.

There are two distinct theses in Russell’s critical concern with power. The first is the Nietzschean psychology. The second and more interesting thesis, however, is his elevation of concern with inequalities of power over traditional concerns with inequalities of wealth and resources. Retrospectively, he wrote that Power
was intended as a refutation both of Marx and of the classical econ-
omists, not on a point of detail, but on the fundamental assumptions that
they shared. I argued that power, rather than wealth, should be the basic
concept in social theory, and that social justice should consist in equali-
zation of power to the greatest practicable degree.\footnote{5}

This second issue could be of great importance even if Russell’s claim
of a universal will to power were false—although, if that claim were
true, the problem of inequalities of power might be sorely exacer-
bated. Moreover, even if one did not hold with Russell that power
“should be the basic concept in social theory” (whatever that might
mean), one could hold with him that it is grimly and systematically
important.

Russell’s two visions—power is understood as a psychological phe-
nomenon and being subject to power as a structural phenomenon—
might fit together well enough in many contexts. But careful attention
to the latter structural phenomenon suggests that the general concern
we have with power in at least modern democratic societies typically
is not psychological. We might suppose with Russell that politicians
have an urge to gain power, although we might go further and
suppose they would then want to use it for some purpose, perhaps
including amassing wealth. But, if they are to gain position, they must
subject their own desires to what will win them office or they must be
lucky enough to have the desires that will get them into office.

The problem of political power in a democracy is therefore struc-
tural on both sides: holding it and being subject to it. We do not have
to worry so much that Clinton or Major or Yeltsin is somehow psy-
chologically more dangerous than alternative office holders. Indeed,
competitive selection might tend to put psychologically power-
seeking individuals into power-wielding positions. We have to worry,
therefore (if at all), that there exists the office that they or any alterna-
tive may hold. And our worry is not merely that they can somehow
control or dominate \textit{us} but that we cannot control or dominate \textit{them}.
Our worry is that power is or may gyrate out of control. Despite his
focus on psychology in \textit{Power}, Russell wrote in 1934 that reorganiza-
tion of our institutions is more important than replacing wicked men
with good men.\footnote{7} By 1938, this might have seemed to be no longer true,
but today in most places it seems to be the apt judgment, and Russell’s
period piece is hardly relevant to many societies.

In addition to concern with power in liberal democracies with
capitalist economies, Russell was concerned with power in the kind
of society he thought best: socialist democracy. Under socialism, there
would be little concern with inequalities of power arising from inequalities in wealth. But in a socialist society, there would remain problems of inequalities of power arising from control over economic enterprises. Indeed, from the evidence of the nascent Soviet socialist state, such inequalities might be even more grievous in a socialist democracy than they would in a capitalist democracy. Hence “State ownership of land and capital was no advance unless the State was democratic, and even then only if methods were devised for curbing the power of officials.” The “evils of totalitarianism” are, he held, especially problematic under a socialist regime.  

Russell was at his best when he saw system and was at his worst when he related it to psychology or to ordinary newsworthy events. Or, one might prefer to say, he was best when he was analytical and was quite ordinary when he was not analytical. Most of his analysis of the nature of power is overly psychological and is therefore quite ordinary. Yet he presented the elements of a coherent and general theory of social power that can be pulled together from disparate passages. Perhaps any very intelligent observer of power relations would have noticed these elements independently of having a compelling theory. But a theory built on these elements is markedly superior to that of the sophisticated German political theorist, Hermann Heller, in the 1933 Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, which was published five years before Russell’s Power, and to many other accounts by serious social scientists writing long after him. In a sense, Russell seems to have been too smart and observant to believe anything so misguided as his own theory of power.

In the following section, I lay out the elements of a general theory of power that is suggested by some of Russell’s occasional remarks. Then I relate this theory to his abstract categories of power, discuss the problem of the inequality of the citizens’ and the governors’ power, canvass Russell’s sometimes seeming assumption that power is zero sum, and consider the nature of agency in social power relations. Then I discuss power and democracy and conclude with brief remarks on Russell’s social science.

FORMS OF POWER

Social power takes two very general forms, both of which Russell discussed at some length, albeit in a disorderly way in scattered passages. First, there is power based in material resources, which
means, in modern societies, that it is based in exchange and the surplus that can come from exchange. We may call this exchange power. Second, there is power based in the coordination of many people behind some purpose or action. We may call this coordination power. In relatively primitive conditions, where the chief resources are little more than sharpened sticks and stones, coordination power is almost the whole story. Once coordination has succeeded well enough to enable a very productive economy, exchange power becomes increasingly important. In our time, exchange power is overwhelmingly important, as in the technological power of the modern military state and in the increasingly effective capacity of states and corporations to monitor and control individuals through electronic means.

Rather than exchange power, Russell writes of economic power (pp. 9-10) and of mechanical power, which is power based in machinery, equipment, or arms. Or, in Russell’s terms, it is “fed by control over mechanism.” Such power is “more characteristic of our age than of any previous time” (p. 21). Russell’s account of such power begins with the exploits of Mussolini in the air war in Abyssinia (p. 21), which is reminiscent of Harvey’s account of the air war in Vietnam. In Vietnam, the pilots dropped napalm on peasants they often could not see, and the helicopter gunships machine-gunned peasants who were commonly too distant to be seen in their suffering as they were shredded into bloody tissue by large-caliber bullets. Both Mussolini and Harvey’s pilots seem appallingly careless in their views of what they did. They are testimony to Hume’s observation that we must see people’s faces and their pain if we are to feel sympathy for them. But Russell’s concern is ostensibly with a government’s control of its own subjects, not with war against poor peoples of the Third World.

Russell implicitly assumed an account of coordination power when he supposed that the impulse to power is two-sided. The impulse is explicit in leaders and implicit in their followers. “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” (p. 12). In essence, this is how coordination power works. Enough of us march or otherwise join together, and we can vanquish others or move mountains. Indeed, in this case, we might even clearly be said jointly to intend the result we achieve. That is commonly a feature of spontaneous coordination power. Such power works without institutional backing only so long as relevant intentions are more or less shared. If some of us have a different purpose from the rest of
us, we may not be able to coordinate, and we then do not have our joint power.

Coordination can be at a very low level of conscious intent. A collection of people might be enabled individually to participate without risk of harm or punishment in a generalized act of plunder just because enough people are participating, as in occasional urban riots. After the assassination of Indira Ghandi by Sikh militants in 1984, spontaneously organized mobs exercised extraordinary power for a moment as they roamed Indian cities, murdered Sikhs, and sacked their homes, virtually without risk of retribution. One can relate dozens of recent similar instances of horrendous coordination power spontaneously brought to bear in Los Angeles and many other U.S. cities, Germany, France, Burundi, Rwanda, the former East Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and so on. Retribution against specifically responsible individuals in such mob actions has commonly been rare. Frequently, the only retribution has been indiscriminately directed at whole groups, often through the contrary coordination of the group that initially was victimized by such power. Some of these gruesome uses of power might be characterized, in Russell’s terms, as traditional, others might be viewed as revolutionary, while some might have been little more than spontaneous acts of plunder. The form, however, was through coordination.

Russell understood coordination power well, although he made it seem more conscious than it might often be, pointing out that members of groups are following the group’s leader because they feel that the leader’s power and success are also theirs. Contrary to this clear uniformity of purpose, we often may follow leaders in various contexts merely because that is the best choice available to us. Indeed, almost all of us might follow merely for this reason, and the fact that many of us do so may be what makes it the interest of each of us to do so. Hobbes’s sovereign could not immediately be vested with power as Hobbes, by sleight of hand, supposed. Rather, the sovereign eventually could come to have power only to the degree that citizens coordinated behind the sovereign to create—or to constitute—power. As Russell noted, “When once the leader’s authority is established, he may inspire fear in mutinous individuals; but until he is a leader, and is recognized as such by the majority, he is not in a position to inspire fear” (p. 17). We typically are like the law-abiding citizens in John Austin’s (positive) theory of law. Each of us must acquiesce because virtually all of us do acquiesce, thereby enabling the sovereign to punish the rare person who does not acquiesce.
In some cases, such as many fundamentalist religious movements, followers might consciously follow as in Russell's claim. But this is not the only form that coordination power takes. For example, institutions coordinate people on certain values and expectations. The effectiveness of such institutions depends on commitment of people to their values and expectations so that they will enforce the coordination against deviants, as in the decentralized enforcement of a religious moral code, or so that they can be mobilized to act against others outside the community. The decentralized acts of enforcement within the community, however, need not fit Russell's casual account of followers and leaders. Indeed, the traditional values and expectations might be built into institutions whose own leaders are as much subject to them as is anyone. There have, for example, been suspicions that popes who were deviant were murdered. Hence coordination can take two quite different forms: institutional and spontaneous.

Each of Russell's forms of power involves both coordination and exchange elements. Russell specifically noted of military power that it "is, in most cases, based upon some other form of power" (p. 28). What he seems to be claiming is that the military resources come from economic power and that the relevant coordination of persons comes from persuasion. But priestly, kingly, and economic power are similarly based in part in resources and in part in coordination.

While Russell focuses on the use of power by leaders to gain control over a populace, he often goes beyond this concern to discuss the use of power for broader purposes. An almost immediate implication of a game theoretic vision of power is that there must be two quite different kinds of power: exchange and coordination. Most two-by-two games are either roughly exchange or roughly coordination. Here, however, the games are those engaged in only by a group that is said to have power. The interaction they would have with others who are in contest with them would then be a further game, which might involve a larger admixture of conflict.

The two general forms of exchange and coordination power can interact (pp. 9-10). Indeed, exchange power depends on a background coordination that allows the creation of resources. For example, because we coordinate on recognizing money as valuable, it is valuable in exchange. We will even accept it in exchange for something we have worked hard to produce. When our coordination on its value breaks down, as in an inflationary period or during an economic crisis, money suddenly can lose its value. But while it has value, it can be amassed and put to use in acquiring resources for controlling
people. Similarly, if we coordinate behind a religious or political leader, our group may therefore be powerful. If we end our coordination, the concomitant power ends. Yet, if our coordination lasts long enough, we may enable the accumulation of resources that our leader can then use to stay in control even against our interests and without our backing. In such cases, we who coordinate may even become the victims of the power we create. More generally, exchange and coordination power often cannot be separated in actual applications. For example, one army might have more and better equipment, but the other might be better coordinated and might therefore prevail.

It is instructive to answer the question, Does power aggregate? Exchange power essentially does because it merely entails putting two sets of resources together. Coordination power is more complex. Two parties who come together for future joint purposes could produce a positive sum of their power as, say, two mobs marching from different directions might meet at the Bastille and have greater power than one of them alone has. Alternatively, two groups coordinated behind slightly different purposes or leaders might dissipate much of their power in joining forces. Two who oppose each other might be expected to destroy part of each other’s power (or part of the source of that power, such as physical resources or people who are mobilized) and therefore to produce a negative sum.

Liberals and Islamic fundamentalists could unite productively in the streets of Tehran, Iran, in 1978 when the goal was to topple the Shah; they could only oppose each other when the goal was to create a new government. Of those two groups, the fundamentalists were institutionally coordinated while the liberals were spontaneously coordinated. In part, therefore, the fundamentalists won the longer term conflict because they could sustain their coordination more forcefully.

The sociologist Talcott Parsons argued at great length that power is a medium for accomplishing various purposes on analogy with money, which is a medium of exchange. One might grant that there is some similarity insofar as power is based in resources, such as military weapons (or the medium of exchange—money—with which they can be purchased). But there is no analogy insofar as power is based in coordination. It requires coordination by a population of traders to give money its value. Coordination of a group of people can create power. Coordination of a group of dancers can create beauty. There is no medium of coordination power in the sense in which money is a medium any more than there is a medium of beauty. Or,

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at least, no advocates of the view that there is have yet tendered a piece of the medium of power to any of their critics in the way their critics can tender a piece of money to them. Nor, alas, has anyone yet tendered to me a piece of the medium of beauty.

RUSSELL'S CATEGORIES

Russell’s abstract forms of power are, again, traditional, revolutionary, and naked power (pp. 27-29). The first two are based in assent, either from the weight of custom, perhaps institutionalized, or from the persuasiveness of ideas. The third category, naked power, is based in coerced acquiescence. These three forms are not categories of power in general but are categories of the power of states over their subjects. Moreover, they are particularly relevant to the power of leaders who are plausibly satisfied with power as an end in itself rather than as something to be used for other purposes. All that is at issue in Russell’s account of these categories is the assent or acquiescence of a state’s subjects to the state’s leaders. The differences between the categories are in the psychologies that compel compliance (p. 28). As general categories of power, they are confusing.

Conceptually, perhaps the most difficult feature of these categories is that the leader’s power is defined in terms of aspects of the followers. Leader A has the power to evoke assent from population P by use of device X. All of these variables are necessary for the definition of power in each of Russell’s categories. If we lump together all of the ways A could have power over P, we can drop the final clause, “by use of device X,” and simply define A’s power as the ability to gain assent from population P. But we cannot simplify any further. For example, suppose A has the revolutionary power to persuade population P to assent. It would now be silly to simplify this claim as “A has the power to persuade.” On Russell’s definition, A does not have power tout court, power that might be adequate for some purposes and not for others. Indeed, the idea of having power tout court, as an engine has power tout court independently of how it is to be used, is meaningless in Russell’s abstract categories.

There seemingly is a similar problem with social power generally. One might suppose that simple exchange or coordination power is not power tout court because there are certain kinds of things they can do and others they cannot do. But this is commonly because power is faced with counterpower. Exchange power that was suffi-
cient for the Nazis to subdue the population of Czechoslovakia might not have been sufficient to subdue the population of Yugoslavia because the latter had power of its own, especially through coordination in guerilla groups. Spontaneous coordination power might seem to have a deeper problem in that a group can be spontaneously coordinated to do only what the members of the group commonly want done. This might be a narrower restriction than that which applies to other forms of power, such as simple exchange power. But the object of spontaneous coordination power still is relatively general. It is not so narrowly defined as the power of leader A to persuade population P to do X.

Independently of this conceptual difficulty, however, the focus of Russell’s account is perverse. It makes sense only if Russell’s will to power is what drives typical—or at least many—political leaders and if success in leading a people is all that we are trying to understand. We would more generally wish to conceive power as the capacity to do various kinds of things, such as the power to find and discipline the disorderly, to manage an economy, to fly to the moon, to defeat an enemy. A conception of power that is virtually specific to psychologically sick leaders is of little interest to us in most contexts, although it may have seemed of urgent concern in 1938. Yet Russell wished to prove “that the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics” (p. 9). His power is no such notion, and his program of proof dissipates on the page.

What virtually all other accounts of social power suppose is that power can be used to accomplish varied ends, typically by getting people to do things they would not otherwise have done. Roughly speaking, we can get people to do things they themselves want to do, things we reward them for doing, and things we coerce them to do. Rewarding people is commonly put into the realm of exchange relations or economics and is not a central issue in much of the power literature. It does have its uses, however, even in creating power. For example, mercenaries can be hired to make a powerful military force, and firms can be paid to produce weapons. Russell’s three categories fall into getting people to do what they want to do (traditional power), perhaps only after being talked into wanting to do it (revolutionary power), or coercing them to do what they otherwise would not do (naked power).

The reason most accounts of power treat it in a relatively general way is that most analysts are concerned with what is done with power
over a broad range of possibilities. Using power merely to get followers for no purpose other than to have followers is not usually a major concern in the real social world. To suppose it is is both a psychological blunder and a failure of sociological judgment.

Why did Russell so perversely narrow his concern? Presumably because the target of his social criticism was the grotesqueries of malevolent political leadership in his time—especially of Communists, Nazis, and fascists—and the possibility that such grotesqueries could spread. His discussions, often brief, of how the tyranny of a small group of leaders could distort their psychology seem compelling, and his theory of power might readily apply to them to some degree, as it might fit Idi Amin or Nicolai Ceaucescu, both of whom came to power about the time Russell died.

Russell also had a pessimistic view of how few people were involved in controlling economic opportunity, and he might have thought quasi-Nietzschean industrial leaders haunted the economic life of the democratic nations of the 1930s just as Nietzschean power mongers dominated the political life of many nations then. And this view, especially when addressed to the possibilities of socialism, may have been the most important concern in _Power_. If his book had not been written at the peak moment of the fulfillment of the Nietzschean vision of power, Russell might have focused primarily on this issue, as he did in his retrospective autobiographical account of what _Power_ was about.17

Let us attempt to fit Russell’s three abstract categories to the general theory of power discussed earlier. In such a theory, if a leader can gain backing, then that backing is a source of _power to do other things_ such as to compel a change of policy, to overthrow a government, or to make war. Indeed, if a cause can mobilize a group of people, then that group has power. In the vocabulary of the previous section, this is then a matter of coordination power. Many instances of naked power rely on exchange power, on mechanism. For example, Russell’s police and military powers in modern nations depend on mechanism, although they also depend on mobilizing people, hence on coordination. And naked power can be exercised through nothing more than coordination, as in Russell’s example of the tyrants of ancient Syracuse, whose “mechanisms” were limited to the same range of knives and swords that those who were coerced had available for their defense.

Note that Russell’s categories confuse the point of understanding power. Assent and coercion almost always go together. When groups,
institutions, and nations amass power, they typically use it to compel—more or less to coerce—various people to do certain things. But virtually all instances of power are based in assent in at least the limited sense of coordination of some set of people. If it is to work well, ostensibly naked military power must be based in assent of some kind by members of the military. Naked power is not based in assent insofar as it affects those against whom it is employed. Revolutionary power is similarly not based in assent insofar as it affects those being toppled from authority; hence, in Russell’s system, revolutionary power becomes naked power in this aspect. Similarly, traditional power is not based in assent insofar as it brings recalcitrants into line and forces them to abide by traditional practices of whatever kind or when it is brought to bear on people outside the relevant traditional group, and in these aspects it too becomes naked power. In all three cases, assent empowers. And in all of Russell’s abstract categories, we would commonly expect power to be used to coerce those who do not assent.

Because his focus in his abstract categorization is on the powers of states to control their own subjects, Russell’s account here is driven by the general supposition that power involves mobilizing people so that his categories concern how those whose coordination constitutes power in a more general sense are mobilized. This fits his claim that his categories are psychological (p. 28). Coordination could be mobilized coercively by naked power—for example, with conscription. When it is, power is used in some more general sense to muster further power, although it might simultaneously undercut the prior power if that was based in assent. This would be a reasonable way to distinguish cases of naked power that is constituted in the end by coordination. But Russell seems to have had more in mind than this, and he clearly thinks that armies exercise naked power over others besides their own soldiers, as Mussolini and numerous others in his accounts did. The perversity of his leader-follower model of power is that it does not include such power used against others besides the followers.

Much of the massive social scientific literature on power takes the form of arguing definitionally about what power is. Is it cooperation or coercion? It is neither, but it involves both. Coordination, which is a form of cooperation, results in power that may be used to coerce. In this sense, cooperation is on the side of creating power while coercion is on the side of using it. There is an old adage that people who can manage people manage people who can only manage things. That adage might be roughly right on the side of cooperative endeavors.
But it is partially wrong in coercive matters. Those who manage bombs, for example, often can well enough manage people who cannot manage bombs.

INEQUALITIES OF POWER

Russell noted that even a democratic government entails a skewed distribution of power.

The members of the government have more power than the others, even if they are democratically elected; and so do officials appointed by a democratically elected government. The larger the organization, the greater the power of the executive. Thus every increase in the size of organizations increases inequalities of power by simultaneously diminishing the independence of ordinary members and enlarging the scope of the initiative of the government. (p. 108)

There are two claims here that merit discussion. First, in this section, I discuss the claim that there are inequalities between the agents of government and the ordinary citizens. Then, in the following section, I address the apparent claim that increasing government power diminishes that of ordinary citizens.

Russell’s worry about the inequalities of power might be read as a worry about the fact that some power is based in resources, which are unequally held. The state holds sway over vast exchange power; a citizen has very little. Although this is not a point made by Russell, there is also a sense in which coordination power is unequally held. Coordination power is based in numbers. The Bastille fell not to resources but to a mob. Such power is in a theoretical sense available to the poor. But such power requires spontaneous coordination, which is not always easily accomplished. Even worse, it is seldom, if ever, sustainable, so that spontaneous coordination can be engaged for quick victories but typically cannot be sustained over the long term, as would often be required to secure the fruits of initial victory. Hence Russell’s mass of citizens can have power, but they cannot be expected to win out in the end against government officials with greater resources. Moreover, they cannot be expected to win out against what Russell calls traditional power, which, unlike spontaneous coordination, is coordination that is well enconced and regulated. It is institutionalized.

In the example cited earlier of liberals and Islamic fundamentalists in Tehran, the fundamentalists were institutionally coordinated. They
had Russell’s traditional power in a sense separate from having such power through control or sponsorship of the government. Rather, they had it as clerical or priestly power. The liberals were spontaneously coordinated; they had Russell’s revolutionary power.

This is, again, the central difference between Russell’s traditional power and revolutionary power. While coordination power can be spontaneous and driven by uniform intentions, mechanical or exchange power on any substantial scale is inherently structural. The latter must involve many actors with varied functional roles and with varied intentions. Hence it is associated with substantial organizations, especially with states. Given that there is a state that has survived for a long while, great traditional coordination power is also likely to be associated with the state, although in Tehran before 1979 traditional clerical power was not associated with the state.

POWER AS ZERO SUM

Now we turn to the claim that increasing government’s power diminishes ordinary citizens’ power. Here and elsewhere, Russell seemed to hold that power is, in contemporary language, more or less zero sum. If the state has more, then individuals and spontaneous organizations must have less. Hence we must weaken the state to secure “power for voluntary organizations [that] embody some purpose which all their members consider important, not a purpose imposed by accident or outside force.”

The obvious reason for rejecting a zero-sum conception of power is that power can enable even those over whom it is exercised. This surely is the central message of Hobbes, who wanted a powerful sovereign to control our destructive conflictive tendencies so as to enable us to prosper. The power of the typical individual in a violent anarchy is minimal. The power of the typical individual in a well-developed state can be substantial. The causal difference between these two states of affairs is the great power of the state to maintain order and also to create means and opportunities for individuals to secure their own lives.

How does this seeming increase in power for all work? In a reasonably well-ordered state, I can do far more than I could do in a nasty, brutish state of nature (pp. 67, 138, 140, 180). Hence you could have power over some of what I do, and yet I still could be doing far more that is not subject to your power. Indeed, you could have power
over some part of my activities and I could have power over some part of yours (p. 108) while the state has power over both of us. Power is more nearly like wealth than it is like Parsons’ money in that it can be increased massively over time through our creativity and our interactions.¹⁹ The supposition that, if the state disappeared, then all of its power would be shared out among the former citizens is ludicrous. Even the supposition that the typical citizen could hold onto his or her power while the state lost its power is ludicrous. A trivial example of the way in which the state’s power can enhance the power of citizens is the regulation of traffic. The laws governing traffic signals are enforced by state power, but this exercise of state power empowers drivers.

In fact, Russell agreed with all of this. He noted that his critic, V. J. McGill, “makes much of the usefulness of the state and the necessity of planning, and the unwary reader would get the impression that I disagreed with him on these points. On the contrary, I agree emphatically, provided the state is democratic.”²⁰ McGill had argued that Russell seemed to be hostile to all power and to view it as invariably harmful. He wrote that Russell condemned or disparaged “any institution which possesses real power and seeks more, especially when this institution upholds ideals similar to Mr. Russell’s.”²¹

Still, as McGill sensed, Russell commonly seemed to view power as harmful. Nietzsche embraced will, hence the will to power, hence power. In “A Free Man’s Worship” (written in 1902 and originally published in 1907), Russell, arguing against the Nietzschean glorification of power, wrote that power seems to be bad and wrote of “the malice of power.”²² Given his rough utilitarianism in public affairs, one might find this an odd conclusion because it must not be power but the effects of power that could be bad, and the latter surely are only contingently bad. But Russell’s concern here might have been with the ethics of the person, which he seems to have viewed in part as an ideal ethics—an ethics of character, perfection, and beauty—rather than an ethics of consequence. In Power, despite its social focus, however, he often seems to view power as generally bad.

Hence it seems that Russell was given to implicitly assuming that power is more or less zero sum, or at least that increasing institutional power entails decreasing individual power, and also to acknowledging that power can be creatively multiplied across levels. Unfortunately, however, his statements are not self-consciously clear on this issue, and we cannot be sure whether he held a clear view. Had he
been more concerned with social analysis than with social criticism, he might have addressed such issues more definitively.

If power is zero sum, then presumably it can somehow be measured, and there has been a substantial literature in philosophy and the social sciences on its measurement. Yet no one has proposed a measure that could be used for general cases although, interestingly, there is a measure for a class of voting games that could be called, in some abstract sense, zero sum. These voting games are zero sum in the sense in which chess is zero sum: what one party wins, another or others must lose. Apart from such contexts, the concept of power has not yet been operationalized or at least not adequately to allow comparative weighing of power across many cases. What we have is at best the beginnings of an ordinal measure of power—and that restricted to similar categories. For example, that the United States was militarily more powerful than Iraq in 1991 seems self-evident. But we cannot say how much more powerful beyond a vague claim that it was, say, a lot more powerful. In the Iraq-U.S. comparison, we can answer the question, Who has greater resources? For exchange power more generally, the answer to this question might be a good proxy measure of who has greater power—so long as only exchange power is at issue.

**AGENCY IN STRATEGIC INTERACTION**

In some sense, Russell’s conclusion that power is out of control in political society, as mentioned earlier, suggests that his initial definition of power misses our problem. Russell defined power as “the production of intended effects” (p. 25). There are uncounted intentions for major social policies and political actions, but there are few easily denoted intended effects. There are far too many causal inputs to political results for us to parse their impact or to relate their results back to the intentions that produced them.

At first impression, therefore, Russell’s causal definition of power may seem to give way to Michel Foucault’s claims that power is pervasive in the state of things and not merely something that people and institutions exercise, that it is independent of agency and intention. One might conclude that power is part of the warp of the universe of human relations because, after all, cause is pervasive. But we can avoid going so far as Foucault in virtually detaching power from agency. Where there is power, typically there is agency, but the
agency often is inherently strategic and not uniquely related to a specific outcome.

Consider the nature of agency in an ordinary game in game theory. You and I each face a set of strategies, say, I and II and i and ii. Your two choices and my two choices result in four possible outcomes: (I, i), (I, ii), (II, i), and (II, ii). Each of us has an effect on the outcome, but neither of us may alone be able to determine it. (In some games, the effective payoffs in all of the outcomes in one of my strategies might be identical, so that I could meaningfully be said alone to determine the outcome if I choose that strategy.) In Mill’s phrase, our outcome is the result of a composition of causes: your strategy choice and mine. Our problem is the composition of intentions or strategies. In virtually all interesting social contexts, this simple example is complicated many times over with the strategy choices of many people interacting to produce one from a sometimes vast array of possible outcomes.

Much of the philosophical theory of action is about actions that directly produce some reasonably well-defined outcome. For example, I flick a light switch and there suddenly is light. Social action of interest generally is not like this. It is, rather, like the choice of strategies in a game.25 Even a cursory consideration of game theory reveals that the choice of strategies can be a dauntingly complex problem. There need be, and typically there is, no best strategy choice for a particular individual. Every choice is commonly in part a matter of taking risks. In this sense, the otherwise unfortunate name “game theory” fits well; strategy choice in games is a gamble. Because social outcomes are the joint product of many individuals’ actions, the action theory that we need for social action could instructively be titled “actions and event.”

Perhaps the nearest we could come to holding that some instance of power lacked agency is in the identification of traditional power, as in the religious moral code that is invoked against all, including ostensible leaders of the relevant religion. But even here there are agents at work or else the code would have no force. The peculiar problem with such power is not that it lacks agency but that it might lack beneficiaries. I sanction your missteps and you sanction mine. Neither of us benefits from keeping the other in line. Indeed, we might all (save perhaps those whose institutional roles are associated with our traditional code) benefit from breaking our coordination on what might be a destructive and obnoxious tradition.
POWER AND DEMOCRACY

In a review of Russell’s *Power*, the economist Frank Knight wrote that, if we suppose a political order is democratic, “the power of its ‘rulers’ is assumed not to be real control, but a phase or organized mechanism of self-control in the group itself; for the people control the government which controls them.” Against this shallow contractarian supposition, however, Russell recognized the problem of the individual citizen who has no interest in attempting to control the leaders who control the citizens. Hence, he supposes, leaders are out of control. Let us consider the nature of this problem briefly and then turn to one of its implications, in Russell’s view, in our era of vast exchange power, especially mechanical power.

In some technical sense, shareholders in a firm have power over the firm’s decisions. Yet, as Russell noted, in actual practice power is largely in the hands of a small number of directors or executives of any publicly held firm (pp. 87, 194). Under state ownership, this problem is exacerbated (p. 195). The citizens who are the ostensible owners of an enterprise individually have no impact on its direction. Virtually all shareholders or citizens might agree on what policy a firm should follow, and yet none might have any interest in attempting to influence the firm to follow that policy by, for example, going to a shareholders meeting to help to change a firm’s management or going to the polls to vote to change its directives. If no one does attempt such influence, nothing may change and the interests of virtually all may suffer. And that for reasons purely of interest, because individual interest in acting diverges from collective interest in acting even when individual and collective interest in the general policy outcome of acting is the same. As Russell said, an individual’s “vote makes so small a contribution to the total as to seem to himself negligible” (p. 188). Russell’s account of this problem is one of a striking number of glimmerings of the logic of collective action in specific contexts. Plato, Hume, Mill, and many others have seen the problem, but its generalization in group theory and in the n-person prisoner’s dilemma is very recent.

In addition to the usual problem of the logic of collective action and the lack of incentive to an individual to vote her interests in a large-scale democracy, Russell noted a bothersome further dilemma: “Democracy gives a man a feeling that he has an effective share in political power when the group concerned is small, but not when it is large;
on the other hand, the issue is likely to strike him as important when the group concerned is large, but not when it is small" (p. 189). And, indeed, more people vote in national than in local elections. In the United States, for example, turnouts in the biannual congressional elections, such as in 1994, are about two-thirds the turnouts in quadrennial presidential elections, such as in 1992. Turnouts for purely local elections are even worse.

Here what is at stake, presumably, is causal effect. Causal impact is enhanced by the scale of the issue but is diminished by the correlative scale of the participation. If only one of these effects were at work, we might readily suppose a unilinear relation in the single direction of either enhancement or diminishment of turnout as we move from local to national elections. But the final conclusion of Russell’s account is that of the contemporary “economic theory of democracy”: citizens are unlikely to have much interest in acting to control their government.

How does this problem fit with Russell’s claims that mechanical power “generates a new mentality, which makes it more important than in any former age to find ways of controlling governments” (p. 22)? He supposed that mechanical power leads some to feel themselves gods without restraint (pp. 22-23). One might note against this apparent association with the machines of modernity that the urge for godhead, or arbitrary personal power, has been pervasive in many mechanically destitute societies. Chaka did not require great mechanical power to lord it over his Zulu people, nor did the pharaohs and emperors of ancient times. Moreover, the corrosive power of the modern media in any moderately liberal state makes belief in godhead virtually impossible; contemporary politicians in democratic societies all have clay feet and worse. Here, perhaps, Russell’s analysis is factually dependent on the reigns of Stalin and Hitler at the time he wrote. Their governments fit his fear. But it still is true that we want and need government to maintain order and to make prosperity possible. We merely need answerable, democratic government. For such government, the problems we face are not those of the “new mentality” of mechanical power but rather the problems of control.

One could speculate on the effect on spontaneous coordination power and its popular or democratic mobilizability of having ensconced institutions running much of our lives. Taylor argues that letting the state do things tends to undercut spontaneous action and eventually even to gut the natural instinct and capacity for such action.28 If he is even roughly right, then the problems of participation in modern
governance are substantial and distressing for anyone who thinks government is likely to be misguided in part merely from ignorance of what is wanted by the populace it serves. Russell seems to have agreed with Taylor, although his apparently chief reason for doing so is not Taylor’s and is also not plausible. His reason is that power is more or less zero sum, as discussed earlier, so that allowing some power to the state deprives citizens of that—or at least some—amount of power.

Nevertheless, in *Marriage and Morals*, Russell also noted that unless a great statesman has “a considerable love of power he will fail to sustain the labours necessary for success in a political enterprise.”29 In *Power*, he was perhaps less enthusiastic on this point, but still he held that power can be beneficial in bringing about constructive order. This is a Hobbesian vision that seems fundamentally true. That leaves as the central issue, again, the question of controlling power in a liberal society to keep it from becoming as vicious as Hobbesian power might be. To a substantial extent, many societies have succeeded at such control.

The problem that tears at many other societies is either the problem that bothered James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville—the tyranny of the majority—or the traditional problem of the tyranny of a mobilized minority. In many societies, spontaneous coordination behind coercive movements is the greatest threat of the abuse of power. We especially need to secure exchange power against seizure by coordination power, as happened in Germany in 1933 and in Iran in 1978-79 and as threatens to happen in much of the Middle East today. Democracy allows a relatively easy way for a coordinated mass to gain such control.

THE SOCIAL CRITIC

In the two years between his books, *Which Way To Peace?* (1936) and *Power* (1938), there was a radical change in Russell’s view. Russell virtually moved from thinking Hitler was merely like all other political leaders to thinking all other political leaders were actually like Hitler. In the later book, he supposed that, because they have the same Nietzschean drive for power, all leaders behave the same way except insofar as they face different constraints. Democracy constrains more than does rule by small numbers, so much so that, while the latter readily turns into tyranny, liberty is possible under democracy and
democratic government can approximate to the ethereal standards of test by trial and error that govern scientific inquiry.

Russell did not give us a theory of power in general. Rather, he gave us a theory of how psychologically pathological power seekers motivate people to follow them. Not to follow them anywhere in particular or to do anything of interest, but just to follow them—because all Russell’s leaders want is power, not anything that power might be used to accomplish. Because Russell himself gave little evidence of having a grand will to power, one might wonder why he thought everyone else must be driven by such a will. Some perversion of solipsism, perhaps.

Some of Russell’s comments on the forms of power are easily separated from the silliness of his universal Nietzschean psychological drive for power. One might conclude that his sociological insight was good but that, when his theorizing was driven by his program of social criticism, it yielded bad social science. Since he himself held philosophical and scientific inquiry to be independent of value commitments, he might have smiled at this conclusion. But one might sensibly suppose that one’s social criticism cannot be independent of one’s social science. Instead of conditioning his social criticism on his social science, however, Russell sometimes created a contrived social science that gave apparent force to his social criticism. And in *Power* he created it without much regard to what could count as a credible explanation of social power in general. Critics and partisans may be superb at pointing out problems worthy of investigation; they may be nearly worthless at doing the investigation.

Russell objected to having his works of social criticism, such as *Power*, included in P. A. Schilpp’s survey of his philosophy. But Russell did social science more or less by the way while he did social criticism. One presumably can read his social science, as Russell said one could read his philosophy, as independent of the value claims in his social criticism. Clearly, however, his social science was provoked by his need to ground much of his social criticism. And in *Power*, the focus on social criticism got in the way of the social science, as when Russell defined power in specifically the forms that states use to rule their subjects even though he went on to apply his notions much more generally. In one of his works of genuine philosophy, he remarked sharply, “The method of ‘postulating’ what we want has many advantages; they are the same as the advantages of theft over honest toil. Let us leave them to others and proceed with our honest toil.” This was not a rule he always followed in contriving a social science to fit his social criticism.
Some of what is ostensibly Russell’s social criticism, such as his judgment (from his first visit to the Soviet Union soon after the October Revolution) that state socialism was a mistake, is solidly grounded in social scientific analyses that still stand as remarkably sound—that may, indeed, be more readily recognized as sound today than they were when he made them. As he wrote in Power, “The philosopher king was dismissed long ago as an idle dream, but the philosopher party, though equally fallacious, is hailed as a great discovery. No real solution of the problem of power is to be found in irresponsible government by a minority” (p. 71). His theory of power is of little relevance to many societies, but it is of relevance to societies ruled by tiny groups of people freed of any control by the polity. Such people can too readily develop the functional equivalent of a will to power.

Russell’s specific value commitment to a blend of social welfarism and libertarianism conflicted with state socialism not because state socialists would necessarily have contrary values. In fact, they often asserted the same values. But Russell’s social science said that the massive organization of power into few hands would work against individual liberty despite the ostensibly commitments of the powerful few to liberty. Those who share Russell’s value commitments might sooner rejoice in the fact that contemporary democratic leaders are openly known to have clay feet than they would bemoan that fact. Such leaders lack the charisma and seemingly superhuman stature to inspire religious fervor. Hence they cannot readily combine spontaneous coordination power with the exchange power that their offices oversee, and they cannot readily count on institutional coordination power as their own. Anyone who shares Russell’s values must be wary of great leaders in any but perhaps brief moments of crisis.

The logician in Russell was often idle while he wrote on society and its problems, and the central arguments of Power are not always graced with his usual logic or even with his usual clarity. His worry about the will to power, carried virtually to insanity, cannot be taken seriously as a general problem, and it is an irrelevant basis on which to found a general theory of social power. The focus on a government’s power over its own subjects is essentially an implication of Russell’s odd psychology of power for the sake of power, a pure urge for control absent any further purpose. If an account of how a government controls its subjects were merely an implication from a more general theory of power, it would be more compelling than Russell’s claim of a quasi-Nietzschean will to power.
Russell’s specific claims about the inherent problem of rule by very small numbers of people not subject to broader control and his insight that even in democracies government is largely beyond popular control are, however, compelling. These claims are independent of his odd psychology of power and are, of course, not original with Russell. In addition, his recognition of two variant ways of coordinating people on some purpose—institutional and spontaneous or, in Russell’s terms, traditional and revolutionary—is acute and important. In its general focus on the psychology of power seeking, however, Power should be regarded as a period piece. Even as such, it is not among the best or sharpest of Russell’s works of social criticism. It has the odd quality of the dilemma Russell said faces democratic voters: they understand local issues best, but they are most interested in grand national issues. Power is about one of the most important and broadest of all social issues. But it is therefore at a level at which knowledge and understanding are hardest to master. Russell failed to master them, although, if his account is shorn of its oddities, it reveals a core of solid insight.

Power was in Russell’s own view a work of social criticism, not of philosophy and presumably also not of social science. It was the work of a critic and gadfly who remained critical of government officials and of power for another three decades. Hampshire characterizes as the key word in Russell’s active life that he did not “assert” to political leadership in its policies—policies that often threatened the lives of millions and maybe even the species.34 Two of Russell’s three categories of power—traditional and revolutionary power—are grounded in assent. Without such assent, those kinds of power are not possible.

Insofar as such power is abused, it can be stopped by withdrawal of assent. This understanding of power is implicitly at the core of Russell’s understanding of politics and citizenship in general. Benign rule is possible only with assent. But malign rule also depends on assent. To stop it, however, requires more than an articulate gadfly. It requires spontaneous coordination of dissent. The evidence of history in countless contexts is that such coordination seldom happens. Even when it does, it all too often does not hold sway long enough to win the day and, when it is weak, the necessary assent for malign rule can be coordinated institutionally.

Russell’s final years sometimes are characterized as bitter. Perhaps that was because he set himself an inherently contradictory program. Perhaps he actually had a will to power. But the power he wanted was revolutionary power—the power to persuade peoples to end their
brutal wars, especially to persuade the United States to end its brutal war in Vietnam, a war that was at its height as Russell died. The problem with this program is that it is not generally peoples who determine to make war but rather governments, as Russell’s account of the uncontrollability of even democratic governments suggests. Governments have both exchange power and institutionalized coordination power, which typically survive the onslaughts of merely spontaneous coordination power.

Russell and other gadfly opponents of the war in Vietnam might eventually have swayed the American government to end its war. But it seems much more likely that the end came because that government could no longer mobilize Americans to contribute their sons in large enough numbers to a war that seemed too stupid for such sacrifice. It failed because it overreached the possibilities of institutionalized coordination, which requires at least limited assent. In a sense, the American government was adolescent. It learned only from painful, partly suicidal experience what might have been learned indirectly from English experience in India and French experience in both Indochina and Algeria.

NOTES


2. This psychological twist may be a peculiar projection of Russell’s own psychology. He seems often to have been concerned with his own urges to power. For example, in his journal entry of 14 January 1905, he wrote, “I am in danger of getting a love of power—the power of the father-confessor” (Bertrand Russell, *Collected Papers*, vol. 12 [London: Allen and Unwin, 1985], 27).


7. Bertrand Russell, *Freedom and Organization* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1934) (published as *Freedom from Organization* [New York: Norton], 144). This comment is in keeping with his view of Hitler before the writing of *Power* that Hitler was just another politician. See further discussion in the concluding section.


12. Ryan remarks, “Like many writers of the 1930s, Russell was more than a little obsessed with the figure of the aviator” (Alan Ryan, *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life* [New York: Hill & Wang, 1988], 151).


19. The value of money can similarly be increased by our activities, but the quantity of it can only be increased by credible institutions, such as banks and governments.


21. McGill, “Russell’s Political and Economic Philosophy,” 589. The final clause in this quote presumably was meant as a rebuke of Russell for his hostility to Soviet socialism.


23. See several contributions to Bell et al., *Political Power*.


apparent relative of strategic interaction. Davidson does discuss Mill's account of cause and problems in decision theory, including that of the ur-game theorists John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, but he does not address the problem of strategic interaction (Davidson, *Essays*, 149-62). Bratman discusses what one might call strategic interactions between one's present and one's future selves as the ground for making plans to constrain future actions (Michael Bratman, "Davidson's Theory of Intention," in LePore and McLaughlin, *Actions and Events*, 14-28). Elster explicitly discusses strategic interaction but does not relate it to action theory (Jon Elster, "The Nature and Scope of Rational Choice Explanation," in ibid., 60-72). I may do the injustice of oversight to one or more of these books. In any case, it need be seen as no criticism of them that they do not address social action in strategic contexts. Even the simplest of categories of action is hard to analyze.

31. He presumably would have approved the omission of his social criticism from the volume on his philosophy for the series, "The Arguments of the Philosophers" (R. M. Sainsbury, *Russell* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979]).

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