

Lust for Power

LUST
FOR
POWER

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Lust for Power
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**TO MY WIFE
WITH
LOVE AND GRATITUDE**

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JOSEPH HAROUTUNIAN

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Introduction:

IS THERE AN UNNATURAL USE OF POWER?

OUR AGE HAS become obsessed with the problem of power. The enormous technological power in the western world, the recent misuses of it for wholesale destructions of men and property, the fear of future holocausts which are expected to "destroy western civilization," have made this problem the major concern of our time. Organized power everywhere has produced an anxiety which prevents a rational ordering of life for peace and welfare. In spite of all our efforts for a good use of our power, we live in an increasing fear of its ill use for universal ruin.

In political relations, and even in personal relations, our favorite way of dealing with other people's power is to match it with our own. We usually try to discourage others from dominating us with an impressive show of our own strength and our willingness to use it against them. Whenever groups with opposed interests confront one another, such a procedure is inevitable. Even in the most peaceful of societies, a balance of power is necessary for justice and freedom. The absence of such a balance in any set of human relations presents an irresistible temptation for the strong to tyrannize over the weak. In a good society, power is controlled with power, through persuasion if possible, through open conflict if necessary.

No discerning observer can deny the effectiveness of this traditional way of dealing with power. It must, however, be admitted that in our day, all balance of power is precarious. Power today is too great and too inebriating. There is no one to distribute it in such a way that there shall be a stable bal-

ance of it among nations, races, classes and regions. The historic ways of dealing with it through "power politics" and open warfare have become much too perilous. It is no longer intelligent and enough to match power with power and to expect even a reasonable measure of security and peace. We need a new understanding of power as it affects the human soul; a new insight into the inner dynamics of the heart of man where power becomes a source of lust which denatures him and finally destroys him.

Our conception of the works of power in us has been simple in the extreme. Even while we are aware of the corrupting influences of power in others, we have lacked aptitude for discovering the same influences in ourselves and for making a fruitful study of them for our common health and welfare. The usual assumption about power is that men and nations seek after it for their security. We take it for granted that power is essential for survival and the good life. Therefore, we want it and want more of it. A simple, obvious, natural desire for life and good is supposed to explain the many-sided conflicts of our time. Why are there so many and protracted conflicts between race and race, creed and creed, class and class, nation and nation, yea even continent and continent? Why is there a ubiquitous bid for power in every conceivable grouping of men: in "city halls," shops, schools, churches, and even families? Because all men want to be secure and to live a happy life.

No doubt, in a time like ours the passion for security is intense. And so is the desire for enjoying a maximum of goods. But we must not overlook men's universal impulse to have their way. People want security and prosperity, and they also want freedom. No doubt they want freedom for the sake of goods and security in the enjoyment of them. But they want it also for its own sake. It is not enough to be secure with one's goods; one must also be free to do with them as one will. Liberty of action is essential to one's pleasure with life and goods. Men have been known to jeopardize both life and goods for the sake

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of liberty. There are many times when nothing is so gratifying as to do what one will simply because one has willed to do it. It is important to keep such "irrationality" in mind when we consider the will to power.

Sheer liberty of action is the sign of another and perhaps greater good: power over our fellowmen. To lord it over others is a means of security, freedom, riches, status, etc. But also, it is a good in itself; a good which can overwhelm every other good dictated by reason and conscience alike. It is strangely gratifying to make people come and go at our bidding, to overrule their minds and their wills, to take away their power and thus virtually to annihilate them. There is an "irrational" but nonetheless soul-filling self-fulfilment in mastery over human beings. There is no pleasure quite like it; and for its sake, men have risked every good and done every conceivable evil. It is well to remember these facts and to take them seriously.

Now, this "lust for power" is irrational and wicked. It must not be mentioned in polite discourse, whether political or scientific. Nevertheless, the unmentionable thing is there. Every man knows that his enemies, those unreasonable and vicious people, have a good dose of it in their souls. There is no other way of explaining their stupid and settled resistance to the common good. Hence, to say the least, some people are possessed of a lust for power. It is not prudent to say it publicly, but in truth a great many people, perhaps most people, love power for its own sake. This may even be true of oneself, but of course, a little, very, very little.

The universality of lust for power has led to the traditional and prevalent doctrine that this lust is "natural." Historians, philosophers and scientists alike have worked with the assumption that lust for power is an automatic expression of "human nature." Even men like Hobbes, Pascal, Spinoza, Bertrand Russell, Lord Acton, Thorstein Veblen, and Jacob Burkhardt, who have been aware of the corrupting influence of power, have treated the "will to power" as a natural human impulse. Nietzsche went so far as to elevate it to the status of a

cosmic principle, and found it in wind and fire as well as in plants, animals and men. Any illuminating and helpful distinction between a natural and unnatural impulse for power, which is basic for the following study, is, so far as the writer knows, absent from our literature on the subject.

Hence it is a common practice among reasonable men to seek to mitigate this "natural" lust with appeals to the common good. When journalists unload their "facts" upon us and analysts explain them for us, when negotiators come together and wise men seek to compromise and cooperate, they all assume that the will to live has no formidable enemy except ignorance. They hope that, given sufficient knowledge and good sense, men and nations in conflict will not allow their pursuit of power to plunge them into ruin. It seems to them altogether natural and reasonable that men and nations should prefer life and good to the love of power. What chance has a natural impulse for power against an equally natural impulse for life and happiness?

But, lust for power is not natural. It is essentially different from that natural love of power whose end is the natural and rational good of man. Lust for power is a corruption of nature and it has nothing but contempt for reason and its quest for a happy life. The chief end of lust is its own gratification and lust for power is the pursuit of power as its own absolute end. Hence it is both absurd and futile to meet lust for power with counsels of prudence. This lust is not in the service of good, and no prospect of good will persuade it to turn aside from its career of vice and villainy. It is disastrous to treat lust for power as a natural impulse and to try to discipline it with reason or force. A new understanding of the genesis of this lust in the human soul has now become indispensable.

Moralists attribute lust for power to pride, ambition, greed, etc. Indeed, these vices lead to lust. But they do not explain its origin, since they themselves include lust and grow out of it. There is no man who is proud or ambitious or greedy, who lacks a strong impulse to lord it over others; and

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it is impossible to say which comes first, his vice or his lust. The "moral" explanations of lust get us nowhere. They give us forms of lust and not its cause or causes.

Nowadays, lust is often regarded as a disease due to insecurity, anxiety, and frustration. Here, we have in fact gone a step further. These maladies of the mind produce inner turmoils in which lust for power is born and becomes virulent. We are deeply indebted to the psychologists who have uncovered such sources of lust and, what is more illuminating, have given us the insight that symptom and cause in human behavior do not always coincide. We have thus moved beyond the common assumption that lust for power is either simply natural or simply wicked.

However, we must face the further question as to the origins of "the neurotic personality." Some psychologists have taken the position that neuroticism is due to the suppression of natural impulses, especially of the sex impulse. This suppression makes for a repository of unconscious drives which are at war with conscious life. Such warfare is at the root of anxiety, frustration, aggression, and the rest. When the inner schism is removed, men are reintegrated and restored to natural health. . . .

Other psychologists emphasize the social factors which make for mental disease. A society in which men live in constant fear of their jobs and goods is a hotbed of anxiety. One in which men are repeatedly frustrated in their pursuit of happiness is a jungle of frictions. Exploitation, segregation, defamation, make for resentment and lust for power. Glaring inequalities, contradictions between ideal and practice, the sense of guilt, etc., turn people into neurotics, who are men haters and lovers of power for its own sake.

Such explanations of lust for power are undeniably valid. They are necessary for understanding its emergence in a given instance and setting. Nevertheless, the appearance of lust for power in *any* setting requires a different explanation from the ones given by the "psychologist." If this lust is due to neu-

roticism, then there are innumerable neurotics who are not even expected to consult the psychologist. These are the "well adjusted" people, the sane and sensible folk who constitute the healthy majority. They are to be found most frequently among the leaders of the people, among men in high places who contribute a disproportionate share to the good and evil in the world. In short, lust for power is not limited to neurotics according to any reasonably exclusive definition. It is not enough to say that nearly everybody is a neurotic. If neuroticism making for lust for power appears under the best of social conditions, it takes more than social conditions to explain it.

There is in man a frustration which neither long life nor "many goods" can overcome and remove. There is an anxiety which persists no matter how well a man is insured against misfortune and loss. The *malaise* of the human soul is occasioned by vicissitudes of life; but it is not caused or produced by them.

Man is not satisfied with a long life, and he is not satisfied with goods. What then will satisfy him? *Nothing* will satisfy him. Nothing can become a substitute for the good without which no good is good enough. And this good is none other than a man's existence which is good in a unique and primary sense. But this good shall be lost. We anticipate this loss necessarily and live under its shadow throughout our lives. This shadow is cast upon the whole of human existence and alters the face of everything. In it the love of power for good is transformed into lust for power, for itself and for evil. The purpose of this book is to examine this transformation and thus to open the way for a more authentic knowledge of man and his ways.

CHAPTER I

New Occasion for Lust

1. *A NEW AND AVAILABLE INFINITE*

LUST FOR POWER, like pride and contempt, is an aristocratic vice. It reminds one of Milton's Satanic Majesty who hurled defiance at the Creator of the universe; of Adolf Hitler who aspired to rule the world; of conquerors, kings and captains of industry, labor leaders, millionaires, bishops and bureaucrats. Almost all bosses are contaminated with it; so are one's rivals and superiors. One sometimes suspects its presence among one's neighbors and friends, and even in the members of one's own family.

However, among equals or nearly equals, lust for power usually lacks that obtrusive energy which calls for corresponding action. It is better to ignore it and to forget about it. One must watch the men of power, and see to it that they do not turn into tyrants. But it is unnecessary, in bad taste, and even harmful, to be concerned with lust for power among the "common people," who, like oneself, care next to nothing about lording it over their fellowmen.

The "common man," this teacher or that shopkeeper, is not aware of an inordinate ambition for power. He has little hope of "getting to the top," and would not even profess a desire for it. All he wants is a steady job, a decent house in a good neighborhood, enough food, drink, and clothing; a car, three radios, a refrigerator, a gas range; enough money for movies, magazines, dinners out and other moderate fun; enough to send his children to a good school or college, enough for insurance and other bills, enough so that he does not have