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It's about authority, stupid! Having power is not enough to get things done

Stein Ringen

The ability to get things done: that is a definition of power that great thinkers such as Max Weber, Raymond Aron and James Coleman have settled for. In my view, they made a mistake. When, for example, Aron writes that "power is the capacity to do, make or destroy," I think he is running ahead too fast. Capacity does not flow directly from power. All American presidents are equal in being the most powerful (men) in the world but they are everything but equal in capacity. Reagan was not a success and Nixon a failure because one had power and the other did not. Nixon did not fail for want of power, but because he was overcome by paranoia and destroyed it for himself and his country.

Following Weber, it has become commonplace to consider power as something relational. Instead, I would suggest thinking of power as something someone has, full stop. It does not sit in behavior or in relationships between people; it sits squarely with persons. In that sense, power is what puts someone in a ruling position – in the same way a driving license puts someone in the position of being a driver. But a driver's license does not tell us much about the quality of the holder's driving skills. And the possession of power does not tell us much about how effective a ruler will be.

Power is at play when governors are up against others. The governor is the one who wants something done; the others are the ones he depends on to make it happen. Power therefore rests on both sides of this relationship. Power is not what governors bring to bear on others, but something that both governors and others bring to bear on each other.

In one extreme, the governor is able to command, others to obey. Here, power is on his side. If your country has a conscription army and you are conscripted, you must serve. And if the government decides to take the country to war, you must go and fight.

The other extreme is when the governor has no power to command and can rely on nothing but persuasion. Now others hold power. On the morning of April 9, 1999, British health officials issued a warning to prospective parents against trying for a millennium baby, April 9 and 10 being the best days for conception. Officials were concerned that health services might not be able to cope with an unusually high number of deliveries in a night when health workers would want to spend celebrating and welcoming the new millennium. The government could inform and encourage (or better: discourage), but the power of action was fully in the hands of others, in this case of the prospective parents.

In real life, extreme cases where power sits either with the governors or with others are probably non-existent. The governor may have the upper hand so that others are obliged to follow, but others are never completely without counter-power. Even in the conscription example, although it is correct to say that the government has the power of command, it is too strong to say that others have to obey. The soldier sent to the battlefield can still fight badly – that is his power. Moreover, soldiers could escape conscription, if only at great cost – for example by going into hiding or exile.

In the other extreme, it may be entirely for others to decide whether or not they let themselves be persuaded – but when your government asks something of

Kurzgefasst: Macht ist im Spiel, wenn ein sogenannter Bestimmer den sogenannten Anderen gegenübersteht. Dabei werden die Bestimmer die Anderen nicht für sich einspannen können, indem sie einfach nur ihre Macht nutzen; vielmehr müssen sie geschickt von ihrer Macht Gebrauch machen. Zu diesem Zweck müssen sie ihre Autorität mobilisieren, und diese Autorität fußt auf einem gezügelten Gebrauch von Macht. Wie viel Autorität ein Bestimmer hat, hängt davon ab, ob die Anderen bereit sind, auf ihn zu hören und sich von ihm überzeugen zu lassen. Auch die Anderen haben übrigens Macht – sie können dem Bestimmer nämlich die Autorität absprechen, die er für seine Führungsrolle braucht.

Summary: Power is involved when so-called "governors" are up against "others." The ability to get things done does not go through power, but through the use of power. The effective use of power is to motivate others to get things done for you. To that end, the governor must mobilize authority, which again depends on the restrained use of power. The authority of a governor is contained in the willingness of others to listen and be persuaded. The ultimate power of others is their ability to deny the governor the authority he needs to lead.

you, you are under significant pressure to comply. In the millennium baby case, the government's power of persuasion may well have worked since there was no rush to hospital of mothers-to-be on New Year's Eve.

Power, strong as it may appear, is seriously limited since it always has to be exercised over someone, which is to say: over individuals with wills of their own. It is true that, sometimes, governments simply issue a command, get on with it and override resistance. For example the British, Spanish and Italian governments in 2003 decided to join the war in Iraq in spite of citizens' massive opposition. But, at least in the British case, not without resistance. As late as a week before the invasion, the commander of the British forces, Admiral (later Lord) Boyce, demanded written assurance from the prime minister that the war would be legal under international law. Behind the demand lay a threat to disobey the order to fight.

It is true that others often have difficulty mobilizing the power they hold, particularly if this requires spontaneous action by a very large number of people. But significant others are not always many. For example, there are just as many ministerial top civil servants as ministers. If these top civil servants – on whom the ministers depend completely – should ever get together over lunch and decide to advise their respective ministers in a co-ordinated manner against the government's plan to reorganize the social security system, the plan would be dead in the water. And if you think this sort of thing does not happen in government offices, you have not worked there. On the eve of D-day in 1944, Churchill 'dictated an instruction that de Gaulle was to be flown to Algiers, in chains if necessary, and a letter to the General ordering him out of Britain. The aide who received the instruction ignored it. Eden had the letter burned.'

And when others are many, their power is awesome—once mobilized. When circumstances conspired in 1989 so that people in East Berlin gelled into a unified front, the police state crumbled and was unable to prevent them from tearing down the wall behind which they had been locked for decades.

The consequence of my definition of power is that the understanding of rule and the ability to get things done does not go through power, but through the use of power. Rulers with much power (for example a government with a solid majority in the legislature which is the normal situation in Britain) who abuse that power will fail. Rulers with less power, like a government dependant on a coalition in the legislature (the normal situation in Germany) will succeed if that power is wisely employed.

Since governors always depend on others to get things done, the wise use of power is to employ it by motivating others to get things done for you. The cardinal feature of the polity, Samuel E. Finer said, is "baron-management." The king "could give effect to his orders only through [the barons]. Therefore they must be induced to give enthusiastic support (the best outcome) or acceptance (the next best) and discouraged from foot-dragging or, at the very worst, open resistance." One does not need much experience in leadership to know that if you unleash your power and start bossing people around, you are more likely to get resistance than acceptance, never mind enthusiastic support. Said President Truman when he handed over to his successor Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Poor Ike. He'll sit right here, and he'll say 'Do this, do that!!' And nothing will happen – it won't be a bit like the army."

What rulers need in order to get others to do is not so much power as authority. A governor has authority when others obey his wishes not only because they must, but because they want to. But authority is an elusive commodity. It appears to rest with the individual. Bismarck ruled Prussia and Germany from 1862 to 1890 as chancellor and engineered the unification of Germany without any conventional political base – simply through his forceful and complex personality and the king's/emperor's backing.

The authority of a governor is in the eyes of others – just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder. When underlings see that spark of authority, it can work won-

ders. If servants acknowledge their superiors as 'their lords,' wrote the observant Machiavelli, they bear 'natural affection' for them. But there is that 'if'. Authority depends on the willingness of others to listen and be persuaded. No governor has any other authority than that which others see in him. He has the authority he is able to extract from those he wants to lead and which they are willing to award him. Authority enables governors to get others to do for them, but at the same time the governor is at the mercy of those same others for the authority he needs in order to lead. Authority, then, although appearing to belong to the governor, is really a gift from those he wants to exercise authority over. The ultimate power of others is their ability to deny the governor the authority he needs to be able to affect them.

Some governments, mainly dictatorial ones, only want to hold on to power, sometimes just to plunder their country. Serious governments, though, want to do something for the country they rule. Their ability to do so, the great thinkers have said, depends on their power. I disagree. Dictatorial governments must lean on power, but for democratic ones, power is not all it has been cracked up to be. Sitting on power does not do governments much good. At best, power can control others, but on its own, it cannot motivate the others to willing co-operation.

Games of governments and others, we now see, are shaped mainly by three influences: power, the use of power, and authority. Power defines the game and determines who is governor and who are the governed. As for the use of power, while it is more or less a given for the governor, the great variable is his use of it. And lastly, the game is shaped decisively by authority and consequently by the willingness of others to obey leadership.

The great thinkers are right that the crux is to get things done, but they are wrong to consider this a direct function of power. Only leaders who understand that governing is an art of authority can succeed. Those who think of it as a science of power will fail. On his re-election in 2004, President George W. Bush said, "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it." He was right, the election had put him and the Republican Party firmly in power. But he squandered his power by disregarding the need for friends both at home and abroad. Two years later, in the 2006 mid-term elections, his government was in tatters and ultimately, Bush ended his presidency with a reputation as one of the least effective leaders in American history.

[Foto: Udo Borchert]

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