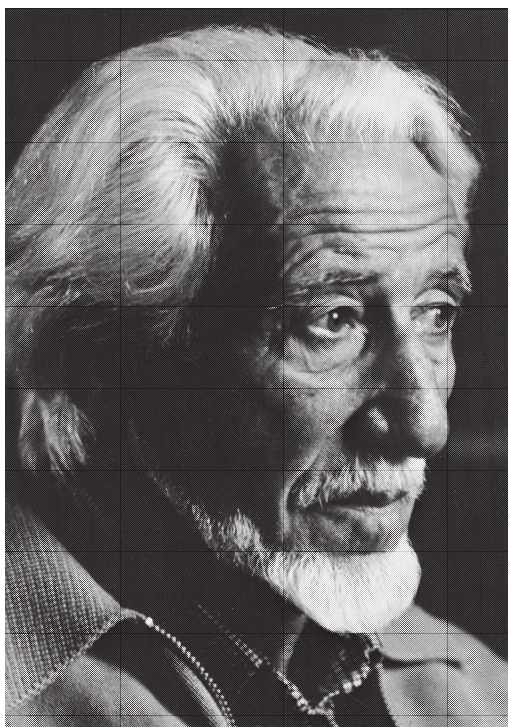


On Power



BERTRAND DE JOUVENEL

On Power

The Natural History of Its Growth



BERTRAND DE JOUVENEL

Foreword by D. W. Brogan

Translation by J. F. Huntington



Liberty Fund

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QUAERITUR:

Pone seram, cohibe. Sed quis custodiet ipsos Custodes?

—Juvenal, VI, 347

RESPONDENDUM:

Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam.

—Solomon

THE QUESTION:

“Keep your wife under guard.” Yes, but who
will guard the guardians?

THE ANSWER:

Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays
awake in vain.

Laborem extulisti Helena ut confovente dilectione hoc
evigilaretur opus dum evertuntur funditus gentes.

[Helen, you produced this work, in that this endeavor was
awakened because your love was nurturing while the world was
being completely destroyed.]



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Foreword

IN THESE OMINOUS TIMES, when the pressure of events makes calm thought difficult and when the apparent need of drastic measures makes hesitation, scepticism, criticism seem a form of petty treason, a book like M. de Jouvenel's may seem to need some justification. For it is a plea for hesitation and scepticism; it is an argument for not letting necessity, "the tyrant's plea," have all its own way. Or, rather, it is an argument for a repeated stocktaking, for the scrutiny of every new proposal for extending the power of the state or of *any other power-monopolizing body*. And so it can be made to seem an argument that will weaken the will to action of the government and the will to obedience of the governed.

It is not that: M. de Jouvenel has too acute a sense of the world and age in which we live to ignore the necessities of that age. But his book is an argument—and a powerful argument—against leaps in the dark when they can be avoided, and an argument against the popular pretence that the darkness is in fact well lighted and the cliff merely a slight declivity.

In this book our attention is called, first of all, to what is, at any rate a striking coincidence: the power of the state has steadily increased and the power of the human race for deadly mischief has increased at the same time. Written as the book was before Hiroshima, the most striking example of this parallel progress was not to the author's hand. But it is worth noting that when we regard with legitimate fear the potentialities of mischief inherent in modern science, we should continually remind

ourselves that potentialities have only been actualized by the will of the state. It was not a spontaneously acting group of “scientists” who made the atomic bomb. It was a group of employees of the government of the United States who made the bomb, and the most important of them were scientists. But the decision to make it was the decision of President Roosevelt, as the decision to use it was the decision of President Truman. To state this is not to impute wickedness to either statesman; it is merely to call attention to the fact that only the state is powerful enough to do damage on this scale—and that the state always means politicians, whether they be politicians in the White House or in the Kremlin. It is a dangerous and idle dream to think that the state can become rule by philosophers turned kings or scientists turned commissars. For if philosophers become kings or scientists commissars, they become politicians, and the powers given to the state are powers given to men who are rulers of states, men subject to all the limitations and temptations of their dangerous craft. Unless this is borne in mind, there will be a dangerous optimistic tendency to sweep aside doubts and fears as irrelevant, since, in the state that the projectors have in mind, power will be exercised by men of a wisdom and degree of moral virtue that we have not yet seen. It won’t. It will be exercised by men who will be men first and rulers next and scientists or saints a long way after. It was an illusion of the framers of the early American constitutions that they could set up “a government of laws and not of men.” All governments are governments of men, though the better of them have a high admixture of law too—that is, of effective limitations on the free action of the rulers.

It is possible, of course, to believe that a new system or a new doctrine will alter these empirically established laws of politics. It is possible to believe that only some easily identifiable and eradicable flaw in the older systems makes the doubts and fears of M. de Jouvenel plausible. In a world without private property,* or without race prejudice, or without religion, or without rain on holidays, these depressing considerations will no longer apply. If you can believe that, as the Duke of Wellington said, you can believe anything. But it may be worth while recalling the disillusionment of Lenin (whom no one has ever accused of romantic optimism). Yet in *State and Revolution* Lenin, on the eve of the seizure of power, saw in the apparatus of the state a mere transitory and soon to

* Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1263b: “None of these evils is due to the absence of property in common. They all arise from the wickedness of human nature.”

be evanescent phenomenon. He learned better, and could he return to Leningrad, thirty years later, he would see installed there a state power more formidable than any known to the Czars, not because the "Revolution has been betrayed" but because, as M. de Jouvenel puts it, "Power changes its appearance but not its reality." Politics are about power; we cannot evade that truth or its consequences. We dream of a better world but it is in Utopia—that is, nowhere.

It is in the popularity of the pursuit of Utopia that the aggrandizers of state power find their most effective ally. Only an immensely powerful apparatus can do all that the preachers of panaceas promise, so we accept the apparatus but find that we have not got the beneficial effects of the panacea, or have got them at a very high, perhaps ruinous, price. It is one of the many merits of this book that it insists on the price paid even for historical triumphs like the French Revolution. Perhaps the Revolution was the only way out of the dilemma in which the French state under the *ancien régime* had involved itself. M. de Jouvenel's highly critical account of the behaviour of the French *élites* on the eve of the Revolution at any rate suggests that this was the case. But the price paid was terribly high. The Republic demanded sacrifices that no king had dared ask for, and these sacrifices were offered up. Perhaps the only way that the decadent Czardom could be replaced as the centre of Russian state authority was by the Bolshevik Revolution, but think of the price paid and still being paid for that achievement! If a religion or a general cause not identified with the nation-state asked for these sacrifices, we should be far more critical than we are. And even if we put at its highest the success of the modern state in doing what it promises to do, we have to notice that nothing is done free and that the price can be ruinous.

Another lesson is the necessity for scrutinizing all claims to political infallibility and impeccability.

"The right divine of kings to govern wrong" is a doctrine we can all laugh at today. But its defender did not deny that kings could govern wrong; that was their fault and their sin. But some modern deifiers of the state, democratic as well as totalitarian, preach and practise a doctrine of Divine Right far more uncritical than Filmer's. For their rulers, the Führer or the Duce, the Party or the Sovereign People cannot do wrong, morally or intellectually. We are, most of us in the West, immunized against the doctrine of political infallibility and impeccability when it comes to us in the discredited forms it took in Berlin and Rome or even in the more sophisticated form it takes in Moscow. But we are not

immune from “democratic” arguments which state or imply that a majority can do no wrong, if it is *our* majority; that, if we are part of it, it cannot do anything disastrously silly. It can and does. And M. de Jouvenel has rightly stressed the dangerous results of this illusion (whether Rousseau was its legitimate begetter or no matters little), for, of course, if the people is always right and the people is the state, then there can be no danger in surrendering into the hands of its mandatories complete, uncontrolled, and irrecoverable power.

But, since the people is not always right, is capable of going wrong morally and prudentially, it would be dangerous to relax the vigilance that is the price of liberty simply because power is in the hands of “the people.” And in any case, power will not be in the hands of the people, but in the hands of rulers. For they are rulers, however chosen. “There is more in common between two deputies of whom one is a revolutionary and the other isn’t, than between two revolutionaries of whom one is a deputy and the other isn’t.” And what Robert de Jouvenel wrote of the Third Republic is true of all commonwealths. Being a ruler is a trade. So we can apply to all types of ruler the judgment of Swift. “Arbitrary power is the natural object of temptation to a prince, as wine or women to a young fellow, or a bribe to a judge, or vanity to a woman.” For the best of motives, rulers will, like courts, try to add to their jurisdiction.

How is this never-ending audacity to be, at any rate, limited? By making sure that effective power is not monopolized. Writing from a French point of view, M. de Jouvenel is conscious of the harm done to France by the withering away, in face of the power of the French state, of all intermediate organizations of power. We have been less tolerant of state greed, of state jealousy, and France serves rather as an example to teach us caution than as an exact parallel to our own situation. But it would be foolish to pretend that the power of the British state is not growing and growing at the expense of the independent bodies, which, in the past, have been such a source of varied strength. The Minotaur, as M. de Jouvenel calls the engrossing state, is permanently greedy.

But it would also be foolish not to notice that the greed of the state finds justification in the failure of the intermediate bodies either to do well what they used to do well, or to find functions in the modern world to replace those which were once their justification. The brilliant analysis here of the decline in public utility of such French corporations as the *parlements*, the descent of the French legal leaders into being a merely selfish and largely parasitic body, ensures that M. de Jouvenel’s readers

will not be misled into thinking that the decline in independent sources of authority is due merely to state aggression. It may be due to the failure in adjustment of once useful bodies. Of course, we can all see, in 1949, the faults of the *Parlement de Paris*. It is a little harder to examine the possibility that Oxford and Cambridge, the Federation of British Industries, and the Trade Union Congress are the equivalent bodies in modern Britain and that they may be dying of their own faults as well as of the more or less deliberate aggression of the state!

And lastly, M. de Jouvenel is too wise not to notice and to state that the acceptance of omniscient state authority is largely due to the fatigue and despair bred by endemic disorder. The French people accepted, even welcomed, Louis XIV, to put an end to civil war; it was internal peace at almost any price. We may be provoked into doing the same to put an end to the threat of another and more terrible war. It was after a nine years' war that it was possible to create the "Brave New World" of Mr. Huxley's fable. "The world will never be safe for democracy," wrote Chesterton after the First World War; "it is a dangerous trade." One of the reasons why it is dangerous is brilliantly set out here, and one of the duties of the good citizen who treasures liberty is to reflect on the problems so set out and developed in this book.

D. W. BROGAN

Dr. Denis William Brogan (1900–1974) was Professor of Political Science at Cambridge University.



Translator's Note

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, its title included, the word "Power," whenever it begins with the capital letter, denotes the central governmental authority in states or communities—*l'ensemble des éléments gouvernementaux*, as the author himself defines it.

The notes which appear without brackets are the author's. Those few which appear in brackets are my own. These latter are in the main directed to informing the reader on matters with which Englishmen and Americans would tend naturally to be less well acquainted than Frenchmen. I have repressed the temptation to add greatly to their number.

The introductory epigraph does not appear in the original but is inserted here with the author's warm approval.

In an article entitled "Concerning Translation," which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for January 1927, Mr. Lewis May tells this story: "I remember saying to Anatole France that translation was an impossible thing. . . . He replied: 'Precisely, my friend; the recognition of that truth is a necessary preliminary to success in the art.' " My "impossible" labours have been much cheered by this consideration. It has in any case been a privilege to have translated this great book.

The absence of any reference to the important books of Ferrero and Russell on the same subject is due to the fact that they were not, unfortunately, available to the author when he was writing.

J. F. HUNTINGTON

On Power



The Minotaur Presented

THE WAR THROUGH WHICH WE HAVE LIVED has surpassed in savagery and destructive force any yet seen by the Western World.

This force has been generated by the unparalleled scale on which men and materials have been thrown in. Not only have armies been raised to the number of ten, of fifteen, of twenty millions of men, but also, behind the lines, whole populations have been conscribed that these armies might not lack the latest and deadliest weapons. Every inhabitant of a country with breath in him has served war's turn, and the non-essential tasks which sweeten life have come to be tolerated at all only so far as they have been thought necessary to sustain the spirit of the one vast instrument of war into which whole peoples have been forged.¹

In this war everyone—workmen, peasants, and women alike—is in the fight, and in consequence everything, the factory, the harvest, even the dwelling-house, has turned target. As a result the enemy to be fought has been all flesh that is and all soil, and the bombing plane has striven to consummate the utter destruction of them all.

1. "The needs of the civilian population must receive sufficient satisfaction *to ensure that its work on war production will not suffer*," wrote the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of December 29, 1942. The paper was inspired by a "liberal" motive! It was concerned to justify the survival of a remnant of life's ordinary activities. That could be done only by demonstrating that the activities of death could not be carried on without them. In England, too, the release of miners from the Forces was urged in numerous debates in Parliament, the argument advanced being the capital importance of coal-mining *for the war*.

The war would have counted fewer participants, it would have wrought a less frightful havoc, had not certain passions, fiercely and unanimously felt, so transformed men's natures that a total distortion of their normal modes of doing became possible. The task of stirring and sustaining these passions has been that of a munition of war without which the others must have proved ineffectual—propaganda. Savagery in act is sustained by savagery of feelings; this has been the work of propaganda.

The most surprising feature of the spectacle which we now present to ourselves is that we feel so little surprise at it.

1. The Proximate Cause

That the entire populations of Great Britain and the United States, countries where there was no military conscription and the rights of the individual were held sacred, should have become merely so much "human potential," distributed and applied by Power as might best maximize the war effort,² is easily explained. Germany was employing in her design of world conquest all her national resources, and there was no restraining her by other countries with only a part of theirs. That had been the mistake of France,³ whose subsequent fate taught Great Britain and the United States their lesson. The former, indeed, went to the length of the conscription of women.

In like manner, the enemy who, to render its bodies more docile, mobilizes the thoughts and feelings of men, must be copied by the other side, who will otherwise fight at a disadvantage. Thus it comes about that, just as duellists follow each other's thrusts and feints, nations at war copy each other's "total" methods.

The total militarization of whole societies is, then, the work—in Germany the direct work, in other countries the indirect—of Adolf Hitler. And the reason for this achievement of his was, in his own country, this—that nothing less than the whole of her resources was adequate to his will to power.

2. The formula is President Roosevelt's.

3. In my book *Après la défaite*, published in November 1940, I have demonstrated how the pressing of all its resources, economic and intellectual, into the service of one idea gives a country which is subjected to such a discipline an immense advantage over one which has not been concentrated to the same extent. This sort of monolithism, the product of our monolithic age, is now, alas, the one condition on which a society can survive in war.