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Mosaic II

The Rise of Mediocrity

The age-old cliché that knowledge is power is not entirely correct when interpreted literally, but it expresses an intimate relationship between these two concepts that is crucial to consider in the synthesis of a working definition of power. The late French philosopher, Michel Foucault, developed an innovative theory on the origins and nature of power that provides the groundwork for this paper. From a Foucaultian perspective, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault put a great deal of emphasis on his concept of discourse, which is simply conversation or information in technical terms. He argues, though, that discourse is the structure of knowledge in a particular period of time. In other words, an individual is limited by the information available to him or her. Further, power is contingent upon changes in discourse as a result of the progression and allocation of knowledge within a certain group of people. This abstract construct of power is better explained through an examination of power in different historical and literary contexts. This paper will dissect and evaluate the similarities and differences in the manifestation of power displayed in Homer's, "*The Iliad*", and Johanna Arendt's, "*The Origins of Totalitarianism*", in order to demonstrate the interminable connection between power, knowledge, and discourse.

In the interest of obtaining a synthesized rationalization of power, it is appropriate to discuss these two works linearly since knowledge progresses in this fashion. Accordingly, true power in "*The Iliad*" endures solely in the individual. This story takes place in an ancient,

patriarchal society that existed long before polytheism was an archaic symbol of the past. Homer weaves an epic tale of heroes, kings, and gods in an effort to immortalize his ancient world. The representation of power in this novel naturally lends itself to a discussion on the contrast between power as a result of inheritance and power that is earned through personal merit.

First, it is necessary to identify the inherent differences between these two embodiments of power in "*The Iliad*". According to Foucaultian theory, discursive formation is "a group of statements in which it is possible to find a pattern of regularity defined in terms of order, correlation, position and function" (Foucault). The discursive formation of this ancient society was deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs, which, in large part, was due to their lack of knowledge of the natural world. Furthermore, society was organized in an unquestioned hierarchical structure that was readily accepted by the people because the overarching belief was that power was delegated by the gods themselves. A king in this ancient civilization possessed an incredible capacity for control due to the fact that the discursive formation of the time included the belief that gods graced kings with a divine right to rule. The monarchy was passed down through lineage; in other words, the power to rule was a birthright. Likewise, Agamemnon, the king of the Greeks, and Priam, the Trojan king, both inherited their throne and each acted as the personification of their respective states, which is the body of power that governs a nation or a group of people that identify with each other. Arendt references the great philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, in order to add a psychological perspective on monarchy, "And as this law flows directly from absolute power, it represents absolute necessity in the eyes of the individual who lives under it," (Arendt 141). As previously alluded to, an individual is limited to the information that is allowed by society; what is more, an alternative perspective on the structure of the state was unavailable at this time. However, with all of this being said, conflict is a product of man's

nature, and a nation could not exist without the ability to defend itself. Accordingly, men who possessed prowess on the battlefield earned power because ancient culture measured the value of a man by his ability to defend himself, his kin, and his nation. However, power in this context is of a different nature than the power that was granted to a king such as Agamemnon.

“The Iliad” offers a stark contrast between the character of the man who inherited the throne of Greece and the individual constitutions of the heroes of the Grecian army. It is quite possible that Homer created these differences in order to suggest the true nature of power in this ancient society. Agamemnon, the Grecian king, was by no means an ordinary individual in terms of his individual capabilities. The king of the Greeks was a competent, and even at times excellent, warrior that possessed enough wherewithal as a leader to sustain his nation for the duration of his reign as monarch. However, his personal attributes are dwarfed in comparison to those of the Greek heroes such as Achilles, Diomedes, Odysseus, and Ajax, to name a few. Each of these great warriors proved himself constantly in the Trojan War and beyond through displays of both physical ability and cunning intellect. Meanwhile, Agamemnon tended to favor the back of the lines whenever a battle ensued and constantly made poor decisions as commander that cost his army and nation countless lives. What is more, Agamemnon waged this devastating war under the guise of defending the honor and reputation of his brother, Menelaus, who was robbed of his wife by a Trojan prince; a petty reason at best considering the unimaginable lives that were lost in the conflict. His true intentions were far more self-indulgent. The Grecian king seized his opportunity to immortalize his legacy as the ruler who conquered one of the greatest ancient cities that ever existed and did so with the confidence of the exceptional warriors at his disposal.

There are several instances in the text where an Achaean hero challenged Agamemnon as a result of the king’s tendency to give incomprehensible orders and make rash decisions. The

first conflict occurs at the very outset of the tale; Agamemnon was forced to surrender his spoil of a victorious conquest because he had upset the gods. In true childlike fashion, the king refused to accept his punishment and demanded Achilles, perhaps the most gifted and famed hero in the epic, to surrender his spoil to Agamemnon. To this request, Achilles responded, “You sorry, profiteering excuse for a commander! How are you going to get any Greek warrior to follow you into battle again? You know, *I don’t have any quarrel with the Trojans, they didn’t do anything to me to make me come over here and fight,*” (Homer 6). Agamemnon remained resolved in his decision to claim Achilles’s prize for his own, which continued to amplify Achilles rage. The hero quickly disregarded any shred of cordiality he had left for the king and fumed, “You bloated drunk, with a dog’s eyes and a rabbit’s heart! You’ve never had the guts to buckle on armor in battle or come out with the best fighting Greeks on any campaign! Afraid to look Death in the eye Agamemnon? It’s far more profitable to hang back in the army’s rear—isn’t it? — Confiscating prizes from any Greek who talks back and bleeding your people dry,” (Homer 8). Despite Achilles’s extreme resistance to Agamemnon’s command, the king followed through with his original decision to take the hero’s prize. However, Achilles subsequently withdrew himself from the conflict without any intention of rejoining the fight, a decision that eventually led to the near defeat of the Achaean army.

The next revealing conflict between a hero and Agamemnon involved Diomedes, an incredible fighter and powerful intellect. The Greeks struggled to match the Trojans in battle without the aid of the godlike Achilles. The Trojan army continued to pin the Greeks closer and closer to their ships. When the plight of the Achaeans grew dire, Agamemnon abandoned hope and declared to his council that they should desert the fight altogether. Diomedes rose in assembly and confronted the king; “I’m going to oppose you if you talk foolishness—As is my

right in assembly, lord. Keep your temper. First of all, you insulted me, saying in public I was unwarlike and weak. Every Greek here, young and old alike, knows all about this. The son of crooked Cronus split the difference when he gave you gifts. He gave you a scepter and honor with it, but he didn't give you strength to stand in battle, which is real power," (Homer 161). Diomedes's rebuttal to Agamemnon's cowardice rejuvenated the morale of the Grecian leaders and swayed the king's sentiment.

These two occurrences of resistance to Agamemnon's authority by Achaean heroes uncover the king's personal incompetence as a leader and, more importantly, the true nature of power in this ancient culture. Achilles and Diomedes both challenged the king's legitimacy as a leader in their respective conflicts because he lacked the same individual values that empower the individuals that Agamemnon commands. The heroes of this ancient society earned their status through personal conquest on the battlefield. Agamemnon's authority was granted to him as a birthright; the king did nothing to earn his seat on the throne. Despite the king's lack of individual ability, he still had the capacity to control his nation and its people. Achilles could have easily dispatched Agamemnon in a fair fight, yet he was still unable to stop the king from stealing the woman he won deservedly in battle because the discursive formation of the period provided Agamemnon with a dominant authority. However, the king's control of the state was contingent upon the persistence of the nation he ruled. Agamemnon relied on the ability of the nation's elite warriors to protect and perpetuate the nation; the dissolution of the nation due to failure in battle would result in the subsequent dissolution of the king's power. Achilles's withdraw from battle led to the near defeat of the Achaean army. Conversely, when the hero decided to rejoin the war to avenge his cousin's death, the tide quickly shifts in Grecian favor; a fact that highlights the location of true power in this story.

The epic tale culminates in a duel between Achilles and Hector, the two most decorated heroes of their corresponding nations. Achilles was entirely aware of his unequivocal power and scoffs at Hector's appeal for the victor to honor the corpse after the fight, "Don't try to cut any deals with me, Hector. Do lions make peace treaties with men? Do wolves and lambs agree to get along," (Homer 430). He then quickly overwhelmed the Trojan hero, thus sealing the fate of the entire city and ensuring Achaean victory. It is evident that both sides recognized that each army was only as strong as their best fighter. Hence, the city of Troy understood that it was doomed when Achilles killed Hector, "And all through town the people were convulsed with lamentation, as if Troy itself, the whole towering city, were in flames," (Homer 435). Achilles owned a true power in this ancient society; a power that was by nature different than the authority permitted to Agamemnon. The Grecian king's ability to exercise his authority was entirely contingent upon the capability of heroes of the likes of Achilles and Diomedes to maintain his nation. Furthermore, it seems undeniable that the contrast between the individual constitution of Agamemnon and those of the heroes that upheld his throne seeks to uncover the truth that genuine power existed purely in the individual capabilities of each man. Due to the knowledge and discourse of the time period, society was structured in such a way that certain men inherited the right to exercise control over a people. However, a hereditary title did not grant a power to a man; authentic power depended on individual abilities and could not be inherited. Thus, one can draw the conclusion that the concept power is different than the capacity to control or influence people.

The manifestation of power in Arendt's "*Origins of Totalitarianism*" is drastically different than its manifestation in "*The Iliad*". This is, indeed, to say that the nature of power is protean, but the change that takes place is eternally driven by knowledge and discourse. "*The*

Origins of Totalitarianism” involves a discussion on modern totalitarian movements, specifically in Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russian. In order to better understand the edifice of power within the totalitarianism movements, it is important to identify changes that took place in civilization since the time of the “*The Iliad*”. Thousands of years elapsed between these two time periods and the epistemic changes that took place shifted the representation of power.

The French Revolution in the late 18th century can be identified as the turning point in history that separates modern and pre-modern times. The French Revolution instigated a reorganization of knowledge that ultimately separated church and state and decentralized the concept of power. Monarchy had endured as the primary organization of state from the time of “*The Iliad*” up until this reorganization of knowledge. Economic strife and enlightenment ideals in late 18th century France led to the rise of the non-aristocratic mass and the dissolution of the monarchy. The overwhelming majority of the nation suffered as a result of the grossly disproportionate allocation of wealth by the state before the revolution. Enlightenment ideals such as equality, individual rights, and brotherhood coupled with the majority’s survival instincts pushed religious discourse aside and positioned the individual and the needs of nation as the primary impetus behind discursive formation. The reorganization of knowledge ignited by the French Revolution gave way to the nation-state and the idea that the people were no longer a representation of the government; rather, the government became a representation of the people.

The emergence of the totalitarianism movements followed the reorganization of knowledge brought upon by the French Revolution and the subsequent decentralization of power. In the interest of forming an understanding of the structure of power within the totalitarianism movements, it is necessary to address the reforms in public consciousness that gave way to Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russian. Arendt again refers to the social theories of

Thomas Hobbes to explain the psychology of the state, “Hobbes points out that in the struggle for power, as in their native capacities for power, all men are equal; for the equality of men is based on the fact that each has by nature enough power to kill another. Weakness can be compensated for by guile. Their equality as potential murderers places all men in the same insecurity, from which arises the need for a state,” (Arendt 140). Hobbes acknowledges that the most basic form of power lies in each man’s ability to kill another man, which is exemplified in “*The Iliad*”. Further, the arrangement of a common people as a nation arises from the need for individual security. However, when the interest of state shifted from the whims of an individual to the needs of the majority, true power shifted inward.

The rise of the concept of nationalism became the instrumental factor in the rise of the totalitarianism movements. The concept of nationalism correlates to the idea of a nation, which is an imagination of the state and its boundaries that unites people across space and time. Arendt consolidates nationalism as “essentially the expression of this perversion of the state into an instrument of the nation and the identification of the citizen with the member of the nation,” (231). Furthermore, since power shifted towards interiority and the interest of the majority, the organization of this majority became the true manifestation of power in the modern age.

Power in the modern sense is characterized by its capacity to be obtained by individuals that are frighteningly average by history’s standards, particularly in the case of the totalitarianism movements. This is perhaps a result of change in discursive formation and rise of the bourgeois class. Arendt points out that Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany, did not possess any extraordinary personal assets and “the fascination rested indeed on the fanatical belief on this man in himself, on his pseudo-authoritative judgments about everything under the sun, and on the fact that his opinions could always be fitted into an all encompassing ideology,” (Arendt

305). This is not to say that any individual that possesses a healthy amount of narcissism in the modern age has power; however, the decentralization of power relocated it in the strength of numbers because a degree of power was invested in each individual.

The fascinating mediocrity of the totalitarian leaders highlights the importance of the concept of the masses, which made these movements possible and empowered their leaders. The idea of the masses directly resulted from the pan-movements and tribal nationalism. Arendt points out the origins of tribal nationalism; “Tribal nationalism grew out this atmosphere of rootlessness. Rootlessness was the true source of that ‘enlarged tribal consciousness’ which actually meant that member of these peoples had no definite home but felt at home wherever other members of their ‘tribe’ happened to live,” (Arendt 232). Future totalitarian leaders were able to use discourse to influence the newly empowered, highly impressionable masses that sought to identify with a greater purpose. Hitler did not create the ideologies that became characteristic of the Nazi movement; however, he was able to use discourse supplemented by his public charisma to set one of the most destructive movements in human history in motion. Arendt refers to the words of the dictator during his rise to prominence to illustrate this point, “God the Almighty has made our nation. We are defending His work by defending its very existence,” (Arendt 233). The totalitarian movement’s claim to divine origin and use of discourse transformed the early followers of the movement into the beginning of this idea of the masses.

The ideology of totalitarian movement in Germany was deeply rooted in anti-Semitism. Again, Hitler did not create the ideals that he preached; rather, he organized his followers into an extension of an ideology that he implemented through discourse. Arendt states, “Racism, which denied the common origin of man and repudiated the common purpose of establishing humanity, introduced the concept of the divine origin of one people as contrasted with all others, thereby

covering the temporary and changeable product of human endeavor with a pseudomystical cloud of divine eternity and finality,” (Arendt 234). In other words, the existence of entities outside the movement threatened the movement itself and the actions of the movement were an extension of God’s will. Arendt continues to rationalize the totalitarian movement’s capacity for evil, “The appeal of tribal isolation and master race ambitions was partly due to an instinctive feeling that mankind, whether a religious or humanistic ideal, implies a common sharing of responsibility,” (Arendt 235). The assimilation into the mob was so enticing because it removed the prospect of individual responsibility for one’s actions.

The totalitarian movement’s true rise to power came with its the use of propaganda and terror. Arendt claims, “Only the mob and the elite can be attracted by the momentum of totalitarianism itself; the masses have to be won by propaganda,” (341). The nature of the movement required the use of terror to instill certain indoctrinations. However, “terror without propaganda would lose most of its psychological effect, whereas propaganda without terror does not contain its full punch,” (Arendt 341). The reorganization of popular thought by this movement created a momentum by power of the masses that eventually got rid of the necessity of propaganda and terror. Suddenly there was a massive group of mindless robots that conformed to the ideals of a madman; a sad reality that led to the extermination and torture of millions of innocent people.

The incredible power achieved by men such as Hitler and Stalin during the totalitarian movements can hardly be quantified. Certainly, it can be said that these men achieved a greater power than a man such as Achilles, arguably the most powerful human in the ancient world. However, Hitler’s individual value is almost laughable when pitted against the greatness of Achilles. Furthermore, power as a concept does not have much to do with an individual. Power

depends on its context; the knowledge of a time period and specific group of people drive the structure of the discursive formation, which determines the nature of power within a people. Hobbes claimed that power is located in an individual's capacity to pursue individual interests but can only do so with the support of the majority. This theory is one that is supported in both *"The Iliad"* and *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"*. The apparent trend in power exposed in this paper is that as knowledge progresses, the capacity of power continues to expand. Power itself is transcendent; even those that hold great power are still subject to a greater power. The question that remains is at what point does knowledge progress to the point where the capabilities earned through power threaten the persistence of mankind?

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