
Dialogue on Power

Power Is Coercion: A Response to Claes Ryn

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Claes Ryn's article "Dimensions of Power"¹ includes a thoughtful and closely argued commentary on my book *After Liberalism*, and it behooves me to respond in the same serious way in which he presents his position. Ryn does not distort my arguments; and though he stresses those aspects of my latest work and of my biography of Carl Schmitt that seem to support his reading, he does so quite justifiably, to demonstrate thematic continuity in my books. He is correct to underline our philosophic and interpretive differences, particularly given the fact that we are often lumped together as exponents of "conservative historicism." In a monograph by the Italian philosopher Germana Paraboschi, the two of us are depicted as fellow critics of and the main American alternative to Straussian thought. Such a cosmological affinity does exist between us, together with a longtime personal friendship, but none of this gainsays our genuine conceptual differences.

In Professor Ryn's view, my historicism is excessively naturalistic and marked by a preoccupation with power-relations, that is, with the question of who dominates whom. There is supposedly a Hobbesian grid that frames my work, and when I turn to historical particularities, it is usually for the purpose of looking at who wields control. Ryn suggests three problems with taking this ap-

¹ Claes G. Ryn, "Dimensions of Power: The Transformation of Liberalism and the Limits of 'Politics,'" *Humanitas* XIII, no. 2 (2000), 4-27; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text.

proach, if it is indeed the one that I inevitably favor. One, I am obsessed with governmental power and therefore do not consider other sources of influence, e.g., the persuasiveness of beautiful language. Two, my reasoning is sometimes circular and thus I land up contending that “managerial elites . . . are ‘powerful’ because they are in ‘government’” without looking further, at “the highly complex reality” that put them there. Three, discourses about “power,” including my work, incline too much toward “abstraction.” They engage in a kind of shorthand for telling us that people in particular situations move in one direction rather than another: “In order for an individual to move in a certain direction, his own inclination must propel him. Nobody can act against his will. A person may choose to die rather than do as another would like” (16).

I assume that what Professor Ryn means when he says “for a person to exercise power, . . . he must gain the assent, the approval of another person,” is that all power rests on the achievement of consensus. Otherwise it could not long be exercised. It is of course unnecessary to tell us that in some cases this approval may be “reluctant or hate-filled” (16). Ryn does not have to bring up the case of brutal tyrannies to make his point. What he should be asking is why the populations of Western democracies submit to having their lives and morals reconstructed for them by the managerial-therapeutic state. Why within a generation have they allowed administrators and courts to colonize their families and to enact a social revolution that they have barely resisted? Talking about control does not suffice to explain this cultural and social phenomenon; and it is simplistic to imagine that such a process could unfold without a great deal of personal assent. In Europe governments have criminalized “insensitive” speech and jailed the perpetrators to protect their populations against fictitious “fascist” threats. The reaction has been popular acceptance—or at least popular unwillingness to see anything wrong with a state of civil liberties that is as parlous as the one that existed in former Communist countries.

Allow me to say in my defense that I never deny the role played by the entitlement-hungry masses as the gravediggers of a bourgeois liberal society. Indeed I emphasize that role in *After Liberalism* and point out that, contrary to what most bourgeois liberals and nineteenth-century counterrevolutionaries thought, the re-

Popular franchise paved way for bureaucratic dictatorship.

sult of a popular franchise and of social democracy was not to create popular upheaval but to pave the way for bureaucratic dictatorship. The managerial state came to power because the people wanted it, though in the best of all worlds they would not have been given that decision to make. Nor do I think it important to attribute this managerial process of control to the defective imaginations or wills of those who endorsed it in the beginning. They were, after all, people of little learning, who believed the state would provide for their needs by redistributing income and by “helping out” with their families. They were placed before a political task they did not have the means, or even physical resources, to address, and they certainly could not have foreseen the perverse consequences to which their empowerment of state managers would eventually lead. I am not sure that much is gained by treating these enablers of managerial rule as actors “within an already existing intellectual and imaginative mind-set with its corresponding desires” (18). Such a description ascribes too much philosophical and aesthetic baggage to those who simply craved material security and were not equipped to think about the questions Professor Ryn raises.

Note that *After Liberalism* deals predominantly with the background of the modern managerial state, how it came to be established and how it turned material incentives into a source of social control. One should not look to this book so much as to the sequel now being completed, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*, for a detailed study of the cultural and moral preconditions of the thought control that is today characteristic of Western countries. It may be argued that the earlier phase of managerial government was far less reprehensible than what has taken its place. For a barely literate and by current standards materially struggling working class to bring to power a modern tyranny was less contemptible than is the current elevation of the state into the indispensable means of fighting “sexism, racism, and homophobia.”

The utter abdication of what were once nuclear families before the state’s reordering of social and moral relations, for the sake of such manipulated words as “tolerance” and “caring,” signals far more than a political problem. Like Professor Ryn, I view it as a social-moral disaster that calls for a detailed examination of religion as well as culture and politics. From my perspective this disaster is related, first and foremost, to a religious perversion, par-

ticularly the degeneration of American Christianity into sentimental egalitarianism and an ethic of individual gratification. Rendering this unpalatable mixture even more repulsive is the addition of social and cultural guilt directed toward politically correct victims. Although it is not entirely clear to me how these composite elements coexist, they do fuse into the religious and moral idealism I encounter among educators, journalists, clergypersons, and celebrities. Never would I attribute their moral flabbiness and self-indulgence exclusively to the operation of government. These human types contribute to as well as reflect the expansion of government power and represent the march of totalitarianism dressed up as therapeutic outreach.

Totalitarianism masquerades as therapeutic outreach.

Let me finally observe that Professor Ryn may be exaggerating when he talks of my notion of power as being “abstract” or compares artistic persuasiveness or female symmetry to what governments can do and have done to people. The political victims of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes suffered and died as a result of physical force they did little, for the most part, to justify or bring about. It is also misleading to compare such brutality to the power exercised by what is aesthetically compelling, even if it is to make the point that political force can only work, at some level, by appealing to imagination. Aesthetic and coercive powers are essentially different phenomena, even if both allow those who exercise these forces to dominate others. One operates through reason and imagination, the other by intimidation. What is appalling about the present rush to embrace political correctness or to endorse governments that promote it by intimidation is the popular contentment with being politically browbeaten and bureaucratically controlled. This is what distinguishes our political situation from the murderous dominations that characterized the Nazis and Soviets. It is a difference but one of degree more than of kind.