



## Magnus Henrekson

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1 Post



## In Defense of Good Power

Fellowship, community, shared patriotism—these essential values of our civilization do not come from just buying and consuming goods together. They come from a shared sense of individual independence and personal effort. They come from working together to build a...



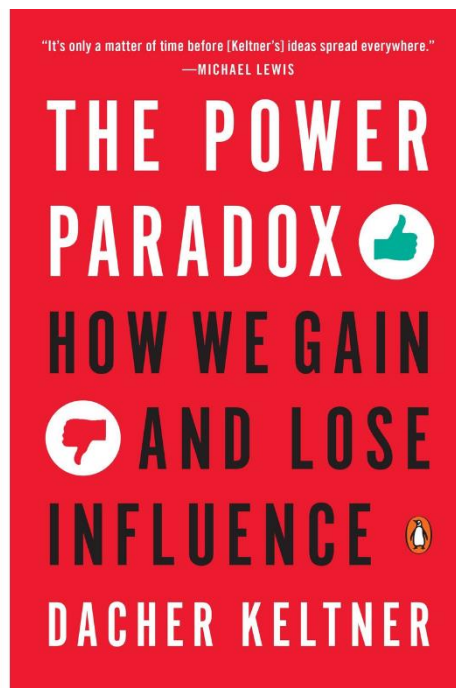
Magnus Henrekson  
02 Oct 2021

Politics

*Fellowship, community, shared patriotism—these essential values of our civilization do not come from just buying and consuming goods together. They come from a shared sense of individual independence and personal effort. They come from working together to build a country—that is the answer to the welfare crisis.*

~Robert F. Kennedy, 1968

Throughout the Western world, power has come to be seen as something that should be restricted at all costs, because increasingly power is associated with coercion, fraud, ruthlessness, and violence. But matters are not so simple. As psychologist Dacher Keltner points out in his 2016 book [\*The Power Paradox\*](#), power is not a uniform concept or something inherently negative. Rather, power can be used in many ways, including to do good. People in positions of power have often used their authority to increase human freedom, for example by abolishing slavery and apartheid, overthrowing dictators, and granting previously discriminated groups equal rights.



More importantly, a one-sided view of power as coercion blinds us to how power permeates virtually every aspect of our daily lives. Power shapes our relationships with other people to the extent that we tend to grant more power and influence, voluntarily, to those who are able to make the decisions that are most beneficial for the group in the relevant context. The fact that we have come to pervasively dominate and shape the conditions in which we live is not the result of superior intelligence, but our exceptional ability to cooperate, transfer knowledge across generations, and create patterns of cultural behavior and norms acquired through upbringing and imitation.

When power and authority in a workplace are distributed meritocratically, this is generally perceived as legitimate, fostering loyalty and ambition to obtain good results. In Keltner's words: "We gain power by acting in ways that improve the lives of other people in our social networks." Thus, the term *meritocratic* is not used here in the now customary sense that power and influence are allocated according to formal merits, such as a degree from a highly ranked university or, more generally, based on highly specific academic or educational qualifications (credentialism). Rather, I use it in a broader sense: the allocation of power and authority within a group or an organization to persons who are perceived to be most capable of making judicious decisions regarding the use of available human, financial, and physical resources that are most beneficial for the performance of the group or organization. This entails empowering group members to advance the greater good, rather than the narrow self-interest of individual group members. Groups reward those people by affording them elevated status and esteem.

Giving individual group members—such as employees in a firm, public-sector bureaucrats, or people engaged in non-profit civil society organizations—substantial discretion regarding how they carry out their duties and making them personally responsible for the result, is often a prerequisite for achieving high-quality results when tasks are complex, impossible to standardize, and fraught with uncertainty. However, I will show that the scope for assigning power and competencies accordingly is becoming increasingly difficult in today's world. This is mainly due to the interaction of at least four diverse ideological and cultural currents that I discuss below. For us to maintain a good society, therefore, good power must be reinforced and defended.

### **Good power**

Effective collaboration to solve a task, grow a company, or build a society requires that individuals fit into a structure. But how does this process take place? Keltner maintains that group members voluntarily bestow influence and authority on those who have the greatest ability to contribute to the group's success. In other words, power is something that others give us.

Humans have an exceptional and inherent ability to see which person in a given context is the most competent and has the right character traits—sincerity, honesty, integrity, and perseverance—to be entrusted with more power than others in the group. For lack of a better term, let's call this *good power*. Hence, we have a tendency to spontaneously create hierarchies in which we grant more influence (and prestige) to certain members of the group, often those who are more able and willing to transfer their knowledge to others, and who have many social contacts through which they can extend their influence by bestowing power on others.

There are two possible routes available to people who have been given power and influence by others: to act with the best interests of others in mind, thus gaining long-term and lasting influence and a good reputation; or to be seduced by power and the opportunities it provides to benefit themselves and their loved ones at the expense of the group. This is Keltner's "power paradox":

The seduction of power induces us to lose the very skills that enabled us to gain power in the first place. ... By succumbing to the power paradox, we undermine our own power and cause others, on whom our own power so critically depends, to feel threatened and devalued.

Thus, good power is constantly threatened because, to varying degrees, evolution has imprinted the power paradox on all of us. Moreover, the opportunities to exercise power based on "coercive force" increased dramatically as humans began to develop agriculture, keep livestock, and dwell in permanent settlements. Continuously increasing surpluses enabled specialization and ever-larger societies, which in turn increased the scope for the exercise of power based on coercion and arbitrariness.

### **Contemporary suspicion of good power**

Recent research by evolutionary biologists such as Martin Nowak and Edward O. Wilson provides evidence that humans have evolved both through selection at the individual level—which promotes selfishness and competition within the group—and at the group level—which promotes selflessness, generosity, and altruism.

Today, the distribution of power and authority according to bottom-up meritocratic principles is also strongly threatened by at least four different ideological currents.

The first is Marxism, with its focus on the distribution of wealth between owners and employees, superiors and subordinates, and the individual and the state in the form of taxation. Marxism takes the production of wealth for granted, and employees are expected never to be tempted to increase their performance without an immediate impact on their salary. This hits activities that depend on a strong, non-material, professional ethos particularly hard.

The second current, working in a similar direction, is liberal individualism with its emphasis on individual accomplishment, for which the most important thing is to succeed. In practice, this also means that money, which is the lowest common denominator, tends to be the yardstick for everything. Today's individualism preaches that you should see yourself as a brand, one to build and exploit to your own advantage. It then becomes important to restrict the amount of knowledge you share with others and to take every opportunity to act in your own narrowly defined self-interest, even if your individual benefit comes at the expense of the group. Pushed to its limit, this idea almost inevitably leads to the problem of the power paradox; even if somebody was initially given power by his or her peers, that person is likely to gradually develop a sense of entitlement which results in the use of this power to benefit him personally at the expense of the group. Production and innovation based on trust and collaboration are thereby frustrated.

The third current that undermines meritocracy and good power is postmodernism, which regards knowledge as something defined by the powerful to oppress others. In postmodernist thinking, there can be no objective measure of ability or competence, which makes it impossible to maintain a legitimate meritocratic system. This "hermeneutics of suspicion" also undermines the motivation to learn from knowledgeable role models, which is and always has been a crucial success factor in human development.

The fourth and final current is the collectivist, identitarian thought of movements such as radical feminism and critical race theory. These should not be confused with liberal feminism and the anti-racism at the core of the 1960s civil rights movement,

which demanded only equal opportunities and rights—that is, to become part of a meritocratic system that had largely been reserved for men from the majority population. Such collectivist movements tend to interpret the distribution of power and authority as a consequence of discrimination on the basis of sex and/or skin color. Their solution is that power and authority should be distributed “fairly” at the group level, rather than according to individual ability.

At present, this final current is extremely virulent, but it would not have gained the necessary traction without being preceded by the exceptional success of postmodernist thinking in undermining the very idea that good power can exist and be perceived as legitimate among those subordinated. It has also been fueled by the fact that traditional Marxism, which pitted workers against capitalists, failed in practice. Likewise, this new collectivist variant gets its *raison d'être* from the claim that identifiable groups are oppressed by other identifiable groups. However, in contrast to Marxism, there is no eventual conflict resolution in sight. Instead, power must be redistributed from groups with too much power to other identifiable groups who are said to have too little power.

Jointly, these four currents make it impossible to foster a shared sense of public morality and shared moral principles upon which a just society can be built and disputes resolved. Lacking shared moral principles, society ends up preaching moral neutrality, which bars value judgments and produces relativism. But as writers such as Philip K. Howard, Michael Sandel, and Jonathan Sacks assert, moral neutrality is incompatible with a free society. Essential elements of a shared morality include truthfulness, reciprocity, and understanding of the demands of group loyalty. Shared social values putting the common good ahead of selfish goals is the cement of a well-functioning society, and likely the most important condition for the success of political democracy. Relativism creates a power vacuum that will be filled by self-interested groups substituting their own values for the shared morality that puts the common good before narrow self-interest.

### **Non-meritocratic distribution of power and authority**

In different ways, these four currents erode the legitimacy of the distribution of power and authority according to bottom-up meritocratic principles. Distribution must then take place according to top-down formulaic mechanisms such as quotas, affirmative action, and proportional representation.

When a person is denied power and authority even though the group considers him or her to be the most appropriate candidate for receiving it, the productive mechanisms flowing from good power are disabled. Group member loyalty to the whole is weakened, and it becomes difficult to delegate responsibility and initiative.

In complex operations where the tasks are difficult to standardize, a prerequisite for achieving high quality is often that individual workers are granted a great deal of autonomy and responsibility to carry out their tasks. This applies not least to education and health or social care. But as economist David C. Rose notes in [\*The Moral Foundation of Economic Behavior\*](#), increased specialization and complexity also give rise to more so-called “golden opportunities” to act opportunistically for one’s own gain and without being discovered by anyone else or where there is no identifiable harm or victim.

When people are deprived of autonomy and responsibility to decide how a task is best performed, their work also becomes unsatisfying and even demoralizing, which leads to recruitment and retention difficulties for skilled personnel. Raising wages seldom helps—it will still be an unattractive job, even if it is better paid.

When power and authority are distributed from below—that is, when good power dominates—a large share of compensation to those who hold higher positions in the hierarchy comes in the form of recognition and respect from other group members, as well as from society at large. All other things being equal, this means smaller wage differentials between the various levels in the hierarchy. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in the research world, where salaries are rarely particularly high and wage differences are small, while differences in reputation often vary greatly.

The fact that humans are predisposed to be favorable to true meritocracy also provides a potent rebuttal of Michael Sandel’s claim that those who end up at the lower rungs of the hierarchy would be more content in an aristocracy than in a

meritocracy. The alleged reason is that in an aristocracy you cannot be held responsible for your subordinate position and your master has not achieved his position through his superior capability, he has just been luckier than you. But, as David Goodhart has argued in [\*Head, Hand, Heart: Why Intelligence Is Over-Rewarded, Manual Workers Matter, and Caregivers Deserve More Respect\*](#), a truly meritocratic bottom-up allocation of power and influence is the only system that “helps to secure people’s consent to the inequalities that are the inevitable consequence of limited government.”

Moreover, it creates a society that is dynamic and wealthy, and it does create opportunities for people who do not come from a privileged background. At any rate, even if Sandel were right—that winners do not deserve their remuneration—the problem for society in the long run is that a rigid aristocratic or bureaucratic culture does not create, innovate, or invent—that is, it does not resolve the “grand challenges” related to environmental sustainability, global health, and development.

In areas that fail to establish a meritocratic system that is marked by stability and legitimacy, there are no opportunities for the most competent, conscientious, and ambitious to claim leadership positions where they can promote the broad public interest. Without a shared sense of morality, nobody who wants to do good can have the moral authority to convincingly, in the eye of their fellow humans, overcome selfishness. If it is not possible to serve a goal that is greater than one’s narrow self-interest, and to do so with credibility and legitimacy, all that remains is to serve one’s own family or group rather than pursue the common good broadly construed.

### **The problem is greatest in the public sector**

For competitive activities taking place in a genuine market, it is costly to deviate to any great extent from meritocratic principles, which also make it easier to attract competent staff—talented people are drawn to meritocratic areas, such as computer game development or elite sports. Here, the skilled and dedicated are rewarded for their success with inner satisfaction, recognition, and often—but far from always—financial reward. Even skilled criminal gang leaders create meritocratic systems in which the most capable members are promoted and gain recognition.



If, on the other hand, external competition is lacking, there is a greater tendency to deviate from meritocratic principles in the distribution of power and authority. The problems arising from such a distribution are therefore most obvious in the public sector. At the same time, activities such as primary education, justice administration, social care, and nursing depend upon professional pride that inspires personnel to do their job as best they can in each individual situation.

This presupposes that the responsibility for the result lies with the individual employee. Paradoxically, public employees in many Western countries have been deprived of their personal responsibility through New Public Management measures and legislation. For instance, as early as in the 1970s, public servants in my own native country, Sweden, could no longer be prosecuted for misconduct. But if they could not be held accountable, they also could not be responsible, which means their jobs were largely emptied of their intrinsic meaning. Instead of performing their work in a dedicated and professional way, public sector workers were urged to adopt a diametrically opposite view of themselves and their activities, focusing instead on the struggle for rights and improved material conditions.

Two examples from Sweden cogently illustrate the point. In the mid-1980s, Inger Olsson, the chairman of the Nurses Union, asserted that nurses should of course fulfil the duties that the trade union and the employer's organization had agreed upon, "but passion, a sense of mission, or personal responsibility beyond what the agreement stipulated are shackles from a time we have left behind." Sigvard Marjasin, then chairman of the extremely powerful Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, asserted that the Lutheran work ethic was a slave morality and declared that "diligence, contentedness, and honesty are three positively laden words. ... This kind of morality among the subjugated is useful. This is exactly the kind of morality the upper class likes others to have." Personal moral responsibility among workers in these professions was thus viewed as an obstacle to political progress.

The populations in Western democracies are guaranteed a number of rights by law such as good primary education, high-quality health and social care when the need arises, support from the police and the judiciary for victims of crime, and so on. However, in order for rights to be *de facto* and not only *de jure*; the fulfilment of your

rights must be somebody else's responsibility. In the end, that person is the doctor, assistant nurse, social worker, policeman, judge, or kindergarten teacher that has been assigned the task of delivering your rights. But if those persons have been stripped of their responsibility, and hence of the deeper meaning of their duties, these jobs are less likely to attract talented and motivated individuals. Or, even if they were initially highly motivated, the way the system is rigged it is likely to either gradually undermine that motivation or induce those persons to quit in search of a more morally sound and result-oriented setting.

Worse still, the individuals employed to deliver your rights will be inclined to strive to extend their own rights also in their role as suppliers of your rights. This will undermine the quality of the delivered rights, and in an increasing number of instances the delivery is cancelled: the police refrain from investigating a crime committed against you, specialized health services become rationed resulting in inadequate care, schools are allowed to fail to prepare the young for adult life without being sanctioned, and so forth. And deep down, the employees, who have extended their own rights to the detriment of their own and their organization's capacity to honor the rights of their fellow citizens, know that this has made their job less gratifying.

For meritocracy to become a reality, the public sector must build and maintain competent organizations that offer attractive employment for talented people who are inspired to fulfill their public obligation to deliver these rights. Today, this is rarely the case—despite a non-existent risk of unemployment and often relatively low educational requirements, there are almost always staff shortages in these jobs. In fact, the vacancies that tend to be most difficult to fill are positions with the purpose of delivering the mandated rights. There are no rights without obligations—reciprocal altruism is a cornerstone of any welfare society. Without a shared morality of reciprocal altruism, the explosion of demanding rights on ever-increasing areas degenerates to demands for personal gain.

**Restoring true meritocracy and reaffirming good power**

To deal with current maladministration in the form of poorly functioning organizations, staff turnover, waste of resources, and faltering civil society organizations, good power must be restored so that authority is granted to those who are best at making decisions that are most favorable to organizations as a whole. The alternative to meritocracy is not compassion, even though it may seem to be so. The alternative lies in new and highly destructive forms of egoism.

The problem extends far beyond sheer economics. A judicious allocation and exercise of power and authority is a cornerstone of a free society. No citizen is free if the police do not have the power necessary to protect us and ensure the rule of law prevails. As soon as a society embarks on dismantling the concept of power, arbitrariness and ruthlessness will step in to fill the void. The recent trend to defund the police in many American cities also shows that the effects are immediate with steep increases in violent rioting, looting, and homicide rates.

Power has to be allocated. If this is done in a truly meritocratic fashion, it is not only accepted by those who become subordinated, but also met with their approval. The evidence suggests that we are genetically programmed to be at peace when we have a place in a group, when we have a role to play that suits us, and when we feel valued—not out of pity but because we actually help create real value.

By contrast, rights decoupled from obligations cannot fill the soul and create meaning. People need genuine responsibility. A true sense of a life well-lived comes from being entrusted with genuine responsibility. In modern life, with its hyper-specialization, it becomes ever harder to see that what we do matters to anyone other than ourselves. This is a prescription for the paradox of despair amidst plenty.

By noting that people's self-esteem largely flows from their contribution to society, it is far from sufficient to just look at the *ex post* distribution of income irrespective of how that distribution has come about. Michael Sandel talks a great deal about "contributive justice"—every person should have the right to contribute to society based on his or her ability and skills.

Sixty years have elapsed since the American psychologist and social activist John W. Gardner pointed out that it must be possible to find a purpose in striving for

excellence irrespective of what goals one pursues. It must be possible to enjoy being appreciated as an excellent plumber, assistant nurse, or village schoolteacher and not just as a sublime musician, sports star, or business executive in the global village. A great society can neither be based on the premise that it is sufficient that everybody has a fair chance to enter "contests" that, by definition, turn most contestants into losers, nor on the premise that unless you are one of those winners, you should be compensated by drawing on mandated rights.

At the same time, the truly creative are those who ultimately fuel human flourishing, but they need room to think and lead. They need good power. We need to make sure they are worthy of it and only rewarded for good use of it, but we must reveal to the world the bankruptcy of calls to eliminate it based on foolish arguments rooted in false premises. There is an enormous challenge and workload ahead of us to come to grips with this task.

*CORRECTION: Thanks to the correspondent who alerted us to a missing word and a misplaced Oxford comma. Both were editorial errors and have now been corrected.*

5 replies 3 Oct



**Geary\_Johansen2020** Regular

A great essay well-argued. I think one of the defining characteristics of good power is the ability to delegate authority downwards. Fairly early on in my vocational life, I found myself running into the problem of subordinates not wanting to take responsibility for problem-solving and using their initiative. Slowly, I began to find queues forming in my office and the demands on my time increasing, to the extent that I was beginning to struggle with my core responsibilities. Luckily, I had an uncle by marriage who was a senior manager for a then world-leading company. His advice was to ask them to “come to me with solutions, not problems”.

It was all about trust, you see. They didn't want to take responsibility because of the potential to be dumped on from a very great height. They needed someone resolute enough to own responsibility and push back against senior managers when criticisms were unjust. What they really needed was someone who understood the axiom that ‘one can delegate authority, but one cannot delegate responsibility’. The experience of finding that workers are capable and able to take the initiative, encourages trust both ways and ultimately ends with the employee gaining more personal value through a proven track record. Often they will be the first to be considered when a rare and precious promotion opportunity comes along.

It was never really about power, power is just the manifestation of something far more important to our still primitive brains- trust. This is the reason why standard diversity programs don't work, because they fail to address potential deficits of trust and actually aggravate them. This article from Harvard Business Review shows how some managers actually want to help mentor talented employees, but often fear that their criticisms may be taken the wrong way unless the mentoring relationship is formalised (it is also worth noting that voluntary involvement is important because it allows ambitious managers to shine, whilst compulsory programs simply add yet another chore to a long list, which quickly becomes deprioritised):

[Harvard Business Review – 1 Jul 16](#)  
**Why Diversity Programs Fail**

And what works better

The Leftists have been barking up the wrong tree all along- probably something to do with the fact that most political systems conducted under the glare of media attention are deeply dysfunctional, and are an exception to the normal and benign processes of trust hierarchies. The symptom of the rot can be found within the truism that most political parties can only attain power through encouraging pathological outrage at the opposition- it's what happens when both main parties have a track record of being untrustworthy.

It they really wanted a more just world then the Left should have been aiming to build trust across arbitrary divides all along.

As usual, my essays are to be found on my Substack which is free to view and comment:

geary.substack.com

## How To Fix America In One Easy Step

The root reason behind the likely pending fall of American Empire is the emergence of a super-class of Left-leaning liberals (I would call them ...

3 Oct



**DataDriven**



quillette:

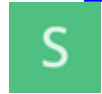
There are no rights without obligations

That one phrase sums it all up. Everything follows from there.

We can and will (and should) argue back and forth regarding what our obligations (I prefer the word *responsibilities*) are, but most will agree that the relationship between the two is vital. If rights are disassociated from responsibilities, it's inevitable that relationships devolve into raw power struggles.

1 reply

7 Oct  DataDriven



**Stan**



Very late comment, so no one will ever read it...

There are rights without obligations. A severely mentally retarded person has the right to life. No one expects anything from them - they are not obligated to do anything, there is no obligation that is tied to their right to live.

I need to explore the idea of "rights" and I haven't done so, I'm a newbie as regards this topic; I have more work/learning to do in this area. But it seems that there is something about "no rights without a grantor." I think of the Magna Carta in which the King or Crown granted certain rights. Or sometimes "society", "the state" grant certain rights. This seeming "side issue" is actually germane. If there is someone, or some body, who/that grants rights, then that entity could grant rights without requiring any obligation(s) in return.

That in turn gets into the idea of the "social contract" and again, I'm fairly unversed in all of this.

1 reply

7 Oct



**Stan**

I agree with another comment, that this is a good essay, well-written. I like especially the listing/enumeration of the 4 “currents” that work against good power, though I would call these “enemies” like Popper does in *The Open Society and its Enemies*.

But the article is missing something. 2 quotes from the article:



Quillette:

... we tend to grant more power and influence, voluntarily, to those who are able to make the decisions that are most beneficial for the group in the relevant context.



Quillette:

When power and authority in a workplace are distributed meritocratically, this is generally perceived as legitimate, fostering loyalty and ambition to obtain good results.

This is all true to an extent and within limits. A major limit: in the workplace, power and authority distributed meritocratically, is not “generally perceived as legitimate” by management. The fact that the author leaves this out, makes me wonder about his background, his biases. His Quillette bio both informs but also means there’s a limit to how much I can guess. I don’t know any research fellows from Sweden - I can’t guess how he thinks, or how they do.

Once upon a time I was visiting a post-hippie commune which included an academic economist among its members. We were discussing Milton Friedman’s *Free To Choose* television program which was popular around then. This economist mentioned that Friedman cited as threats to freedom, both Big Government and Big Labor; but he omitted Big Business. That Big Business at least belonged in the discussion of “enemies of freedom” was obvious. And its omission from Friedman’s TV series, to me, very telling of bias. The series was hours long, so this is not an aspect or topic that had to get cut due to length/time limits.

In this good article by Magnus, he lists the 4 “currents” or as I prefer, “enemies” of good power. But omitted is the most obvious one of all, from and in my own personal experience. And that is, the authoritarian nature of the workplace, of corporations. Possibly also of American Capitalism and/or some other situations such as the oligopolies that dominate health care now in the U.S.A. But I will stick to the workplace since that’s where I can witness.

(And by the way, in this context, I like to use the word “authority” rather than “power”, but these are much the same, for this discussion.)

Unlike another commenter, I never had a position in management; for personal reasons. That meant that any authority I ever had, was granted, just as Magnus said, more or less spontaneously, and always voluntarily/by volition, by those around me - typically my peers. (I worked with computers/in “IT”, by the way - sometimes in the capacity of consultant, troubleshooter, firefighter, “expert”.)

I learned fairly soon that I had to get an idea, of what and how the management reacted to what Magnus calls “good power.” Most important was my direct boss but others in titular positions of power, also mattered. We all, I suppose, know the titles - “V.P. of operations”, “manager”, “supervisor”, “director”. People who have power based on their place in the org chart.

Many times, my own boss, having gotten some idea of my capabilities and personality, defined the task to be done, and hired me to do it, would be comfortable when others in the organization would, often very quickly, spontaneously grant me authority or as Magnus says, power. But other times, not so at all. Some bosses, some people in titular positions of authority, especially if they are lacking in actual authority (the kind that stems from being respected for your skills and ability), were and are positively allergic to someone else “usurping” authority.

And even when bosses do respect others’ natural authority, Magnus’ concept of “good power” being voluntarily bestowed by the community at large, is kind of antithetical to how corporations work, in practice. With the exception of worker’s co-ops (and this is indeed a major exception), the workplace, as I experienced it and from everything I ever read or heard about it, is authoritarian. Pretty much everyone (in a non-unionized field) is retained/employed “at will”, meaning that the employer may discard, jettison, fire, lay off, make redundant - basically, kick out the door.

A management book I read a long time ago said that American business, and professional management, came of age more or less around and after the time of World War II - and that the management structure reflected this. Generals on top, giving orders, all the way down through the “chain of command” - privates/worker bees on the bottom. Basically that’s still apt. Just ask anyone who works for a living. Few will contradict the idea that if you don’t like it, more or less your only option is to take a hike; and if it did happen that you got too “uppity”, you’d be taking that hike involuntarily.

This fact of how it is to work within the American workplace nowadays, is so obvious and universally agreed-upon, that I feel dumb just recounting it; it seems redundant, beating a dead horse.

Magnus is certainly on to something - what he calls “good power” I’ve long thought of as “natural authority”, and when working in co-ops, have had to try to manage. You want the most good power or natural authority that you can possibly get. On the other hand, there has to be structure, and some formality. And of course there inevitably arise situations in which two people, each with plenty of good power/natural authority, disagree on what should be done. For example, one wants to spend the available capital budget for the quarter on a new truck; the other, on more attractive shelving. Which to choose and how to make the decision?

But in more than just a few real-life situations, the concept of “good power” is an oxymoron. The only power that is tolerated is, “the boss says it, so go do it.” Do not evince any hint of power because management hates this and is positively allergic to it - you’ll get shut down, shot down, or simply fired, in short order.

It isn’t always that harsh - in some other real-life situations, it has to be recognized that the employees actually do have skills, experience, ideas, and ability to execute, and that if you don’t allow these - that is, if you stamp out initiative too hard - you won’t accomplish your



mission. Those were mostly the environments I worked in. Management tries to treat employees with respect, instead of as underlings. But the power structure is still there.

Some people in the U.S.A. are, for example, receivers of state benefits (welfare, unemployment, Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid). That they are subject to the rules written and administered by those in power, is obvious.

However, most people in the U.S.A. work for corporations. Which nearly universally, direct power down from the top. Therefore, in most people's (Americans') lived, personal experience, the primary enemy of good power, is, the employer. Or you could say "the system", "the establishment", some other terms.

Incidentally, in an Ayn Rand book (yes, I've read some of hers), she describes a publisher whose employees revolt and defy his wishes. I'm going by memory here and can't cite the title or chapter - I believe it was low- or mid-level employees who were the actors.

Not long ago, one couldn't point to many examples of employees "rising up" like this. I have a hard time thinking of any. But recently this kind of "bottom up" exercise of power has actually happened. I don't know whether Quillette readers would think this is "good power" - I'm referring to the actions taken, for example, by New York Times employees, doing their woke thing, apparently getting upper management to accede to their wishes, and getting senior staff fired, reprimanded, shown the door.

11 Oct



**Geary\_Johansen2020** Regular

[en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

### **Two Concepts of Liberty**

"Positive liberty... is a valid universal goal. I do not know why I should have been held to doubt this, or, for that matter, the further proposition, that democratic self-government is a fundamental human need, something valuable in itself, whether or not it clashes with the claims of negative liberty or of any other goal... What I am mainly concerned to establish is that, whatever may be the common ground between them, and whatever is liable to graver distortion, negative and positive liberty...

You should read about Isaiah Berlin and the two concepts of liberty- 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'- or negative and positive liberty. The abuse of power often comes in the form of positive liberty, with government licensing what people are allowed to do, for society's good.

Sometimes this government force of positive liberty can be felt indirectly. A government may tax a football stadium and subsidise an opera house if they feel that watching opera is better for people than watching football.