THE STATE

ITS NATURE, DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS

GIANFRANCO POGGI

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Its Nature, Development and Prospects

To the teachers, students and secretaries
in Tom Burns's Department
at Edinburgh University, 1964–1988

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Gianfranco Poggi

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Preface

Over ten years ago I published *The development of the modern state* (Stanford, 1978). That book is still in print, and I hope it will remain so, for the one the reader is now holding is a new and different book.

As its subtitle indicates, it reconsiders the question of how the state came to be and attained its contemporary form(s); but whereas my treatment of that question accounted for most of the previous book, it is now treated only in chapters 3 and 4; and, while the two books share a typological approach to that theme, they conduct somewhat different arguments.

As to the rest of this book, it mostly deals with topics not discussed in the previous one. I start from the notion that there exists a plurality of forms of social power, one of which - political power - constitutes the institutional content of the notion of the state itself (chapters 1 and 2). After reviewing the 'story' of the state, I confront the question of how one might evaluate it and explain it (chapters 5 and 6). My treatment of the contemporary liberal-democratic state is more extensive in this than in the previous book, and considers different aspects of this topic (chapters 7 and 8). In chapter 9 I offer a summary discussion of the communist party-state, which *Development* had not even mentioned - a discussion made rather more tentative by the fact that between the time I first drafted it and the time I wrote its final version, the Soviet and East European political scene witnessed unforeseen developments of great significance. I mention these, but do not even seek to suggest what their final import might be. Finally, my last chapter presents a number of arguments to the effect that 'the state of the state' is not a healthy one today, but ends up with a timid two cheers for the old beast.

As has been the case with all my previous books, this one has also arisen

out of my teaching practice, for its content has been developed within courses I have taught at the University of Sydney in 1984, at the University of Edinburgh in 1986, and at the University of Virginia in 1989. I thus owe a great deal to the audiences of those courses for the contributions they made to my thinking on my subject.

Desmond King, a colleague at Edinburgh, read drafts of all the first few chapters and offered a number of helpful criticisms on them. Other such criticisms have been offered by John Meyer, of Stanford University, and by my old friend Beppe Di Palma, of the University of California (Berkeley). Victor Zaslavsky's comments on my chapter on the Soviet party-state put me further in his debt. Tony Giddens followed the progress of my writing patiently - for the manuscript took much longer to write than either he or I expected - and commented thoughtfully on successive drafts. Both my daughter and my wife read the penultimate version of the book and sought to improve the final one.

I am very grateful to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, of which I am currently a Fellow, for allowing me to complete this book in a most supportive and friendly setting; and to the Center for Advanced Study of the University of Virginia for the financial support provided by the National Science Foundation under grant BNS87-00864.

Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences,
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1 December 1989

Part I

1

Social Power and its Political Form

I

What is social power?

Our effort to understand 'the modern state' may begin with a brief discussion of a much wider, more basic concept – that of social power. Unfortunately, this not a matter of starting out from a notion that is simple and unproblematic; on the contrary, 'social power', and indeed 'power' itself, are also complex and controversial notions.[1] We may, however, disregard the attendant complexities and controversies, and seek to convey straightforwardly the universally significant, raw phenomenon, to which the notion of social power points.

That is: in all societies, some people clearly and consistently appear more capable than others of pursuing their own objectives; and if these are incompatible with those envisaged by others, the former manage somehow to ignore or override the latter's preferences. Indeed, they are often able to mobilise, in the pursuit of their own ends, the others' energies, even against their will. This, when all is said and done, is what social power is all about.

Yet we may feel that we are going overboard in our willingness to accept a rough-and-ready understanding of the phenomenon in question; that, in particular, the word 'somehow', used above, is too generic to be of much use. We might then seek to differentiate somewhat the notion of social power, by asking ourselves how, on what grounds, the favoured people manage the feat in question.

Three forms of social power

We might give first, again, a generic answer, to the effect that social power rests on the possession by those people of some resources which they can use to have their own way with others. Our question then becomes – what are these resources?

Most answers to this question[2] (in this formulation or others) end up by distinguishing three forms of social power. Here, for instance, is the version of this distinction offered by the Italian political philospher Bobbio:

> We may classify the various forms of power by reference to the facilities the active subject employs in order to lay boundaries around the conduct of the passive subject . . . We can then distinguish three main classes of power: economic, ideological and political. Economic power avails itself of the possession of certain goods, rare or held to be rare, in order to lead those not possessing them to adopt a certain conduct, which generally consists in carrying our a certain form of labour . . . Ideological power is based upon the fact that ideas of a certain nature, formulated . . . by persons endowed with a certain authority, put abroad in a certain manner, may also exert an influence upon the conduct of associated individuals . . . Political power, finally, is grounded in the possession of facilities (weapons of all kinds and degrees of potency) by means of which physical violence may be exerted. It is coercive power in the strict sense of the term.[3]

Except for characterising as 'normative' the form of power Bobbio labels 'ideological' – a term which is too laden with potentially misleading connotations – I subscribe to this tripartite distinction.

The role of coercion

The state, our object of concern throughout this book, is a phenomenon principally and emphatically located within the sphere of political power. Thus we may from now on in this chapter, limit ourselves to this form of social power – and notice how Bobbio's definition of it (but not only Bobbio's) connects it, starkly and perhaps shockingly, with weapons, violence, coercion. *Shockingly*, I suggest, because on the strength of this definition the bandit, who makes people hand over their possessions at gunpoint, may appear as the prototypical political figure.

A bandit, however, normally threatens, and thus has his way with, a few individuals, for a strictly limited time, and can compel them to perform only few, narrowly circumscribed activities. If we concern ourselves instead with manifestations of power which affect larger

numbers of people, encompass a large range of activities (and inactivities) and do so for longer periods of time, this disqualifies the bandit from consideration. It does not, however, exclude the reference of the phenomena we are concerned with to violence and coercion; at most, we might say, we can redefine the prototypical political figure as not so much a bandit as a warrior, availing himself of the military superiority he and his retinue enjoy over an unarmed, military ineffective population, not just to terrorise the latter but to rule over it.

But again (even ignoring the difficulty often found in distinguishing between the bandit and the warrior . . .) one may continue to find it shocking that the phenomenon of political power should be connected as directly with violence and coercion as the reference to the warrior suggests. After all, the manifestations of political power most of us routinely experience – the tax assessment notice, the fine for traffic violation, the blather of politicians at the hustings or on television – seem to have very little to do with violence and coercion.

Yet there are good grounds for relating conceptually the whole phenomenon of political power to the unpleasant realities evoked by the figure of the warrior. Ultimately, it would be difficult to think of any significant embodiment of that power, no matter how much it may differ from the warrior in its appearance and its concerns, no matter how dignified by law and consensus (think of a judge or of a popular statesman), which does not owe its political identity to the fact of relating however indirectly, to violence and coercion. The American sociologist Peter Berger has phrased this point as follows:

> The ultimate and, no doubt, the oldest means of social control is physical violence . . . Even in the politely operated societies of modern democracies the ultimate argument is violence. No state can exist without a police force or its equivalent in armed might. This ultimate violence may not be used frequently. There may be innumerable steps in its application, in the way of warnings and reprimands. But if all the warnings are disregarded, even in so slight a matter as paying a traffic ticket, the last thing that will happen is that a couple of cops show up at the door with handcuffs and a Black Maria.[4]

In the light of this, what we should consider as unique to political power, as conceptually intrinsic to it, is control over the means of violence, rather than the direct and frequent recourse to their employment. In any case, the non-coercive aspects of political experience, or indeed of political power, are numerous and significant. Various authors quote Saint Augustine's provoking query, 'what are kingdoms but robberies on a larger scale?' as evidence of his bitter awareness that coercion is the defining feature of the political form of social power, and

omit a clause that qualifies that dictum: 'what are kingdoms, if justice be removed, but robberies on a larger scale?' The qualification is important: the fact that, as it were, the bottom line of political power is constituted by coercion, can be transcended, in moral terms, by the uses to which that power, and indeed coercion itself, is put. Presumably these uses, in Augustine's mind, can make a kingdom rather different from a large-scale robbery.

Commands

I shall quote another religious text as a pointer to the complexities of political power. This concerns the centurion episode in the life of Jesus, as narrated in the three synoptic gospels; the gospel according to Luke has the centurion – a minor Roman military official – beseech Jesus on behalf of his sick servant in the following terms:

> Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof. But just say one word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority; and I say to one of my servants, 'go' – and he goes; and to another, 'come' – and he comes; and to another, 'do this' – and he does it.

This text, however indirectly, points to a central feature of political power once it is stabilised, standardised into authority: its exercise takes the form of the issuing of commands.

Now, a command on the one hand is always explicitly or implicitly complemented by an 'or else' clause, a pointer to the command-giver's ability to use coercion in order to overcome recalcitrance or resistance on the part of the person receiving the command. On this account, there is a distinctive (and sinister) factuality to commands, an implicit (and sometimes explicit) reminder that 'we have ways to *make* you obey . . .'

On the other hand, a command is a thoroughly intersubjective operation: by means of it, one subject seeks to initiate and control another subject's activity. It is also thoroughly symbolic in nature, and presupposes the other subject's ability to entertain and interpret the message addressed to him/her. On account of both its intersubjective and its symbolic nature, every command implicitly acknowledges that compliance with it is, when all is said and done, a contingent matter, requiring both that it be properly understood and that the person to whom it is addressed be willing to obey it. (As Roman jurists used to say, *Etsi coactus tamen volui*: I may have been compelled, but in the final analysis I committed my will.)

Legitimacy

The significance of these non-factual aspects of command – that is, of the routine expression of political power – is witnessed in the emphasis which political and social theorists have often placed on the notion of legitimacy. Once more, this is a complex notion, raising difficult conceptual questions. Once more, a few elementary considerations suffice to justify that emphasis. Consider the following line of argument:

- Normally, commands are not given for the sake of giving them; whether or not they evoke obedience is not a matter of indifference to the giver of a command.

- The latter, then, is interested in restricting the element of contingency attached to compliance. He/she can prefer to do so by making explicit the 'or else', 'we have ways . . .' component of the command. A Roman emperor used to express this preference by saying of his subjects, 'let them detest me, as long as they fear me.'

- Normally, however, command-givers consider a compliance exacted through fear (or, for that matter, evoked primarily by a consideration of the direct, immediate advantage compliance may bring to the person receiving a command) as less reliable, more brittle and niggardly than a compliance willingly granted by a person convinced that the command-giver is morally entitled to expect obedience, and correspondingly feeling morally obligated to grant it. Thus:

- A political power relationship, other things being equal, is made more secure, and its exercise more effective and less costly, to the extent that it can credibly appeal to principles establishing such an entitlement and such an obligation. It may be said to be legitimate to the extent that it can do so.

The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) added a particular twist to this line of argument, which had long been agreed upon by political and social theorists.[5] He reasoned that if legitimacy was a significant, consequence-laden property of stabilised political power relationships (if, indeed, it contributed materially to their stabilisation), then the precise nature of the typical principles presented (and accepted) as grounding the entitlement to command and the obligation to command, was also likely to be of some consequence. He thus used variations in those principles (among other things) as ways of characterising various aspects of what we may call, paraphrasing William James, the varieties of political experience.

Certainly, throughout history, the phenomenon of political power, based ultimately on the unequal availability to individuals or groups of facilities for practising coercion, and normally qualified and limited by reference to principles of legitimacy, has become embodied in very

different arrangements. Its comparative significance with respect to other forms of social power, or indeed with respect to other pheonomena not involving any power relations, has also varied greatly.

This book does not survey the range of variation which the arrangements concerning political power have covered in the course of history. All the same, its theme – the modern state – is wide enough to afford the reader a glimpse into the diversity and complexity of the political power phenomenon. I shall devote the balance of this chapter, however, to a few further considerations concerning political power and political experience in general.

II

The rivalry between forms of social power

We saw earlier that there are three major forms of social power: economic, normative and political. Their bases differ very significantly, being respectively the control over critical material resources, over the content of social beliefs, values and norms, and over material and organisational facilities for sustained coercion. Yet, at bottom, the operations of all three powers revolve around the same object: the ability to control and direct the use and development of a society's ultimate resource – the activities of the individuals making up its population.

For that very reason, it is probable that the three powers (or rather, the groups which have built up one or the other of them as a facility for the pursuit of their own interests) will contend with one another. Their contest will have two overlapping aspects. On the one hand, each power will seek to restrict the autonomous sway of the others, diminishing their autonomous impact upon that ultimate object. On the other hand, it will seek to enhance itself by establishing a hold upon as great as possible a *quantum* of the others, by converting itself to some extent into them. (If you can't lick them, let them join you, as it were.) In the course of both aspects of the contest, each power will seek to emphasise the significance of its own resources, the saliency of its peculiar uses. What do these amount to in the case of political power?

The distinctiveness of political power: paramountcy

A first answer can be given by referring to, as I have phrased it above, that power's peculiar uses. These uses normally consist in safeguarding a given

society's territorial boundaries against aggression and encroachment from outsiders; and in imposing restraints upon those individuals or groups within a given society which use or threaten to use violence or fraud in pursuing their special interests.

It can be claimed for political power that it has a functional priority over others, for only in so far as it discharges those tasks can individuals can go about their business - and that includes the exercise of whatever other form of social power they possess - in a (relatively) peaceable and orderly manner. For this reason it is sometimes claimed that political power is paramount with respect to other forms of social power. This point is made as follows by Bobbio:

> Let us first consider the relations between members of a given collectivity. There may be strong disparities of economic power among them, and those deprived of means of production may be clearly subordinated to those possessing them. Ideological power may also be much in evidence, in that most members of the population routinely subscribe to and abide by the beliefs and values put abroad by the dominant class. In either situation, however, there may be circumstances, no matter how infrequently, in which only the resort to physical coercion can prevent the insubordination or disobedience of the subaltern groups of the collectivity.
>
> Let us consider, further, the relations between different collectivities. Here, ideological constraints and inducements are not likely to be of much significance in maintaining the status quo; whereas one collectivity may well apply economic sanctions in order to induce the other to adopt a certain line of conduct. Yet, in this context the decisive instrument for the realisation of the will of one of the parties will be, in the last resort, the employment of force - waging war.[6]

The distinctiveness of political power: ultimacy

A second answer considers the particularities of the resource in which political power, as we have construed it, grounds itself - violence. We can define this as the application, or threatened application, of physical force, affecting the existence, bodily integrity, and freedom from restraint of individuals by being brought to bear upon them, their property, or other individuals with whose existence and wellbeing they are significantly concerned.

In the light of this definition, political power can be said to have a quality we may call ultimacy. Violence - or the threat of it - appears as the facility of last resort in shaping and managing interpersonal relations, for it operates by causing sensations and activating emotions which all sentient beings experience, and which in their rawer forms do not even

presuppose the quality of humanness in those on whom it is brought to bear.

This feature of violence – in German, one might characterise it as *voraussetzungslos*, that is, capable of operating in the absence of any presupposition – probably accounts for what we have called before the'factuality' of commands. This feature is emphasised, for instance, in Rüdiger Lautmann's discussion of the use of force on the part of police officers:

> One forgets too easily, that the police have to do with power in a very immediate sense, as physical coercion employed against men. When the door to a dwelling is smashed through, or a man is captured, overpowered or killed, it makes little difference from a purely external viewpoint, as far as the person affected is concerned, whether this is done at the hands of a criminal or of a guardian of order. [my translation][7]

Another German author, Wolf-Dietrich Narr, has emphasised the peculiar features of physical violence and the uniqueness it confers upon a power grounded in it: 'Physical violence has the particularity of producing consequences directly, immediately, without the recourse to media of communication; normally, speculations about its causes and forms are superfluous . . . it addresses the integrity of the human body in direct, immediately graspable and comprehensible fashion.' Besides, the forms of violence – culminating in killing – which are typically at the disposal of those exercising political power have a distinctive absoluteness about them.

> There is a wide range of gradation in the recourse to physical violence. Spouses hit each other, and so do children. A fist fight erupts in a tavern. But in each of these cases the physical nature of the individual in only partly compromised, even though one's body may be black with bruises. It makes a decisive difference if instead it is not just part of the body that suffers damage, but the human body as a whole that is affected or threatened, as happens with imprisonment and with killing or the threat of killing . . . Whoever is in a position, credibly to threaten others with physical annihilation, has at his disposal a sanction potential which is incomparably superior to all other sanctions. Not just the quality of existence, but existence itself is at stake. Whoever within a society has such power to annihilate, determines what ultimately happens. Having it, on this account, constitutes the very core of the political experience. [my translation][8]

A further feature of violence, recently emphasised by Popitz, is what he calls its boundlessness. He quotes Solzhenitsyn: 'To the disadvantage of the ruled, and to the advantage of the ruler, man is so constituted that, as long as he is alive, there is always something else one can do to him.'[9]

Another contemporary German author characterises as follows the unique features of 'means of physical coercion':

> They are more universally employable than other sources of power, because they operate indifferently with respect to the moment in time, the situation, the subject and the theme of the activity which is to be motivated . . . One can reasonably expect that violence must reach a high threshold, before it makes sense, to those affected by it, to choose instead to challenge it and to engage in a struggle, however hopeless. And its means do not markedly depend on other structures, for they presuppose, to be effective, only a superiority of physical force, not status superiority, group membership, traditions, role complexes, availability of information or institutionalised value conceptions. [my translation][10]

Finally, this grounding in violence imparts to particularly intense moments of political experience – warfare, the 'no holds barred' confrontation between factions unrestrained by constitutional rules in their struggle respectively to hold and to grab power – a specific quality of momentous irrationality.

Lenin liked to use the expression *kto kogo?* – meaning 'who whom?', who defeats, who kills whom? – to emphasise the unavoidable moment of momentous contingency in the outcome of armed confrontation. Weber reminds us of 'the utterly universal experience that force always begets force, that everywhere the most idealistic and (even more so) the most revolutionary movements become mixed with social and economic interests in establishing domination, that the recourse to force against injustice has as its final outcome the triumph not of higher right but of greater force or shrewdness.'[11]

In dealing with political power, then, we are dealing with a particularly loaded human reality. Consider the following. As we have seen, it is possible to see political power as being paramount with respect to other forms of social power, by pointing to its distinctive 'missions' – the defence of the territory from external aggression and the ordering of relations internal to it. Yet, together with these two minimal aims (and indeed, sometimes, instead of them), political power can pursue almost any others one can conceive; and in doing so it may impose very heavy burdens on society (and on the other social powers). Worse, it need not perform those two functions well, if at all; it can, in particular, generate much of the disorder which it claims to be intent on curbing. (There are unfortunate similarities, in this respect, between the warrior, whom we have recognised as the prototypical political figure, and the bandit, to whom we have tried to deny that recognition.)[12]

Such reflections on the nature and effects of political power have for a long time inspired a number of critical questions, which in various

formulations have been the object of sustained attention over the millennial course of Western social and political theory. Let us consider a few of the most fundamental and provoking among such questions.

Why political power?

That is, on what grounds does political power constitute a constant, wide-ranging and (as we have seen) momentous aspect of human existence? What basic requirements of human existence, if any, does political power fulfil? What intrinsic human potentialities does it express and assert? The answers to these and similar questions have been very varied. Consider a few:

- According to Aristotle, who probably articulates a view widely held within Greek civilisation, political experience is the key aspect of human nature, the highest dignity of our species. Only humans, as free and rational beings, have the capacity to develop through rational discourse the designs for living characteristic of the collectivities in which they live. The most noble and distinctive of these is the city – that *polis* from which politics and related terms derive. And ideally it is the citi-zens' peaceable, open-ended public argument that produces the valid, enforceable understandings of virtue proper to each city. Because this is an ideal, it is only occasionally and imperfectly fulfilled, and the Greeks were the first to adopt institutions intended to fulfil it. At the same time, it is an ideal inherent in human nature, at least as a potentiality; and other forms of political experience, which negate and restrict the free participation of individuals in determining the models of conduct valid for the collectivity, give only inadequate, corrupt expression to that potentiality.

In the Greek view of political experience, its specific power aspect (the 'vertical' dimension, as it were, of the experience)[13] is seen as subordinate to other aspects embodying its 'horizontal' dimensions, and emphasising the coming together in discourse and in shared endeavour of rationally thinking and freely associating individuals. Essentially, the task of power is to make binding upon each collectivity its specific designs for living, and to uphold their exclusive validity in dealing with other collectivities; their vertical, power component, however, becomes salient to the extent that citizens' involvement and the open-ended and public nature of discourse are restricted or excluded. (It is in Roman political thinking that that component becomes preponderant *vis-à-vis* other aspects of political experience.)[14]

- Starting from a different vision of human nature, which emphasises the savage and greedy passions motivating the individual, one can construe political