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# Decoding Power: 21 Lessons from History

DECODING POWER  
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## Preface

All great sociologists have talked about the concept of power. It has been a hot topic of many philosophical theories when explaining the class system prevailing in our societies. On the other hand, there is a libertarian school of thought which advocates freedom. It entails that power is a creation of tyrants to curtail individual liberty. It is a diabolic concept which has not only survived but also thrived throughout human development. So why humans created a phenomenon which subjugates other humans? This question has perplexed many philosophers. The birth of power is shrouded in mystery.

The mystical birth of power is not the only question which is unanswered. We also do not know why people vie for power. Why it has been the ultimate goal of many people across every race, religion, culture, and sex? Do we know if power is perused to satisfy personal agenda or achieve something bigger?

The riddle of power becomes even more difficult to understand from leadership perspective. Many believe that empathy and affection is the dividing line between a tyrant and a leader. If this is indeed the criterion, then why do we call Lee Kuan Yew as a great leader when he effectively curtailed civil liberties and media freedom. On the other hand, we qualify Joseph Stalin as a tyrant when he was able to reduce income inequality in USSR.

There is a consensus that power is a measure of morality. We call Adolf Hitler as immoral as he triggered World War II by conquering other countries but how do we explain actions of George Bush when he invaded Afghanistan. Was Bush also acting immorally?

Similarly, we are yet to know if power resides in an elite or have democracies been able to dilute power to an ordinary person? If democracy is a solution to distribute power, then how elites manage to reach the top of hierarchy in many democratic societies. Why do we see so many families controlling political parties? India is the biggest democracy in the World, yet it had three Prime Ministers coming from the same elite family.

All these questions have remained unanswered so far. It is because the desire of power is a subject in Psychology, the exercise of power comes under Sociology, the impacts of power are studied under Politics and the dynamics of power are studied in Leadership. So, one must master all these subjects before answering all these questions. This book combines all this knowledge in one place. It takes lessons from the life of powerful people in history to develop a model on how to construct power. The book answers all the above questions in one go.

As you read through the twenty-one lessons contained within these pages, you will come to understand the true complexity of power and how it operates in both the grand scheme of history and in the minute details of our everyday lives. The lessons learned here will give you a deeper appreciation for the forces that shape our world and provide valuable insights for understanding and navigating the power struggles of today.

Whether you are a student of history, a political scientist, or simply someone interested in understanding the world around you, this book is an essential read. So, join us as we decode the history of power, and gain a deeper understanding of the forces that shape our world.

## Theme 1: Genesis of Power

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## Chapter 1: Institutionalizing Power

*“Liberty may be endangered by the abuse of liberty, but also by the abuse of power.”*  
*James Madison*

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, power was divided between Church and the Throne. The Pope enjoyed tremendous influence over monarchs. His appreciation of the monarch was seen as a sign of legitimacy to the throne. So, when Martin Luther led the reformist agenda in Christianity, King Henry VIII jumped to defend the Catholic Church. For his gusto defence, Pope Leo X titled him “Defender of the Faith” which reinforced the legitimacy of House of Tudor. However, both King and Pope went on diverging paths when Henry VIII wanted a separation from his wife – Catherine of Aragon. She was the widow of Henry’s elder brother Arthur. Henry married her in 1509 but they could not bear a male child. Henry’s desire to have a male heir and marry Anne Boleyn led him to request Pope to annul his marriage. On the other hand, new Pope Clement VII had taken papacy. He categorically refused to annul the marriage which led Henry towards “English Reformation” and create a separate “Church of England.” He persuaded the parliament to pass “Act of Supremacy” which unified monarchy and church. This watershed moment kickstarted the demolition of religious power across Europe. The unification of power within monarch was complete. The era of segregating religious and political power was over. This incident raises a lot of question but a particular one is why did people start depositing power in Pope and then King Henry VIII? What are the reasons that led to the birth of power when it curbs individual freedom?

Humans were exposed to the concept of power from the onset. They saw power either at the time of their creation as propagated by mythologies or through observing the laws of jungle as propagated by evolutionary theories. Whichever way we look, humans knew about power and its repercussions from day one. However, the institution of power could have died in its infancy. As is often the case that a concept is most vulnerable when it has not deep rooted itself. Cannibalism was one such thing which could not root itself and died after the formation of agrarian society. Similarly, slavery and fratricide are greatly diminished as human societies evolved. However, power not only survived its initial days, but it became the basic building block in societies through a phenomenon called as “social contract.”

Social contract is a hypothesis which advocates that humans willingly or tacitly agreed to stay together in a society. Humans are driven by their need to survive and self-preserve. So, in the initial days of humanity, our ancestors decided to enter Pactus Unionis. They agreed to come together to form a union to increase their chances of survival. Solitary living hampered human’s survival rate due to dangers posed by diseases, wild animals, and hostile environment around them. On the other hand, communal living hedged these risks and greatly increased survival rate. So, humans exchanged their unlimited freedom given by solitary-living where they were free to take any action with communal-living where their actions were bound by some set of rules. These rules curbed unlimited freedom but protected the need to survive. It is the creation of these rules which led to the institutionalizing of power. The custodian of these rules became the first power

holders. The social contract offered its subjects the option to either embrace communal-living or go back into solitary state where they enjoy unlimited freedom in their actions. This is the same argument which Socrates used to justify his own death penalty. He had the option to escape the prison and live in exile or accept death penalty. Socrates decided to remain true to the social contract and accepted death by drinking poison. So, the concept of power, which is perceived as diabolic in modern age, as it curbs freedom, was strengthened, and institutionalized by none other than our ancestors. They preferred their need of self-preservation over freedom which led to the survival of power in our societies. They willingly gave away their independence by submitting to power where they could ensure their life.

The concept of social contract is often critiqued for not complying to the historical evidence. The anthropological records prove that humanity started by living in society than in solitude. On the other hand, social contract advocates that humans started their journey from solitary-living. This criticism, though, invalidates the social contract timeline but it still does not explain the rationale behind communal living. The first humans, while living in a society still faced the same dilemma. They either had to embrace the rules of the society or defect to a place where they could live a lonely life without any rules. So, one may disagree with the chronology of social contract but there are thin grounds to dispel the arguments on how social contract institutionalized power.

All social contractarian philosophers are consistent that humanity's sole purpose of entering social contract was to seek protection in exchange for freedom. But they disagree on the level of freedom which is compromised in social contract. Based on that, all contractarian philosophers can

be distinguished into three types of social contract – Singular, Distributive and Pluralistic. Singular Social Contract is when laws curb the highest levels of freedom as laws are made and driven by one powerful institute, Distributive Social Contract is when members of society agree together to curtail as much amount of freedom as deemed necessary to warrant survival while Pluralistic Social Contract is when people decide their own rules which curb minimal levels of freedom. Let us look at some famous social contract theories based on the level of freedom they preach.

### 1. Singular Social Contract

Thomas Hobbes believes that institutionalizing power in the social contract was a necessity. The main virtues of humans were force and fraud in the state of nature due to which humans had poor rates of survival. There was no guarantee of individual rights, hence, people decided to wield under some rules so that their rights could be protected. They agreed to curtail their freedom to empower a strong entity which could make and enforce those rules. These rules were to protect and punish the violators. All members of the society followed the same set of rules made by the power which meant that everyone's freedom was equally curtailed. Hobbes strongly believes in a very authoritative and empowered entity to make these rules as human nature cannot be trusted with any freedom. He believes in the maximum curtailment of individual freedom.

Hans Morgenthau is another philosopher who was not a social contractarian but a classical realist. However, his realist theory is based on the same lines as Hobbesian social contract. He believes that nations reflect the basic human instinct of survival where they tend to prefer their own interest. Their national priorities take precedence over any other moral principle. This necessitates realism and accumulation of power so that no one attacks them. Morgenthau is of the view that to stop this accumulation of power by individual nations, creation of one powerful world state is mandatory. The world peace is not possible until world community comes together to shun their national interests to wield to one power which takes care of world peace. In Morgenthau's social contract of nations, individual countries much like individuals must let go off their interests and freedom to create a strong world state to govern peace.

## 2. Distributive Social Contract

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believes that rules are made by general will of the society. General will is a collection of everyone's rights where no one is under or overrepresented much like a functioning democracy. Since, general will does not represent an individual will, hence, the freedom of the individual is curtailed only by the overlapping area between individual and general will. The power ensures that remaining rights of the people are protected by complying to the same rules of the general will. So, when an individual violates these rules, they violate a part of their own will. Rousseau believes that general will acts as an insurance against mutiny as no one likes to violate their own rights.

Another great philosopher, Immanuel Kant also believes in this type of social contract. He believes that social contract is a natural conclusion to "categorical imperative." It is a moral law of reciprocity where people act in a way which they believe others should act. He believes that humans are free to act according to their natural self. He puts a lot of emphasis on freedom but confined the boundaries of freedom by universal law of reciprocity. Kant believes that morality is the core reason due to which people shun the state of nature and come together in a society. They agree to wield to power so that everyone lives under the same laws of morality. The role of power is, thus, to ensure that people are free to live in a society if they are within the spheres of rationality. In Kant's social contract, the individual freedom is curtailed up to the extent of morality.

John Rawls expanded on Kant's social contract. He developed a thought experiment of "original position" whereby people are asked to make rules of a hypothetical society behind "veil of ignorance." The veil makes people unaware of what social status or gender they will have in the society they will be part of. He believes that provided no information is available to them about their own status, people will make laws which appeal to justice and impartiality. They will not make rules which may benefit or harm any segment of the society as they may themselves end up as victims of their own rules. Thus, Rawl's social contract curtails freedom of people to an extent of empowering an institute which not only implements laws of morality but also includes elements of impartiality and justice.

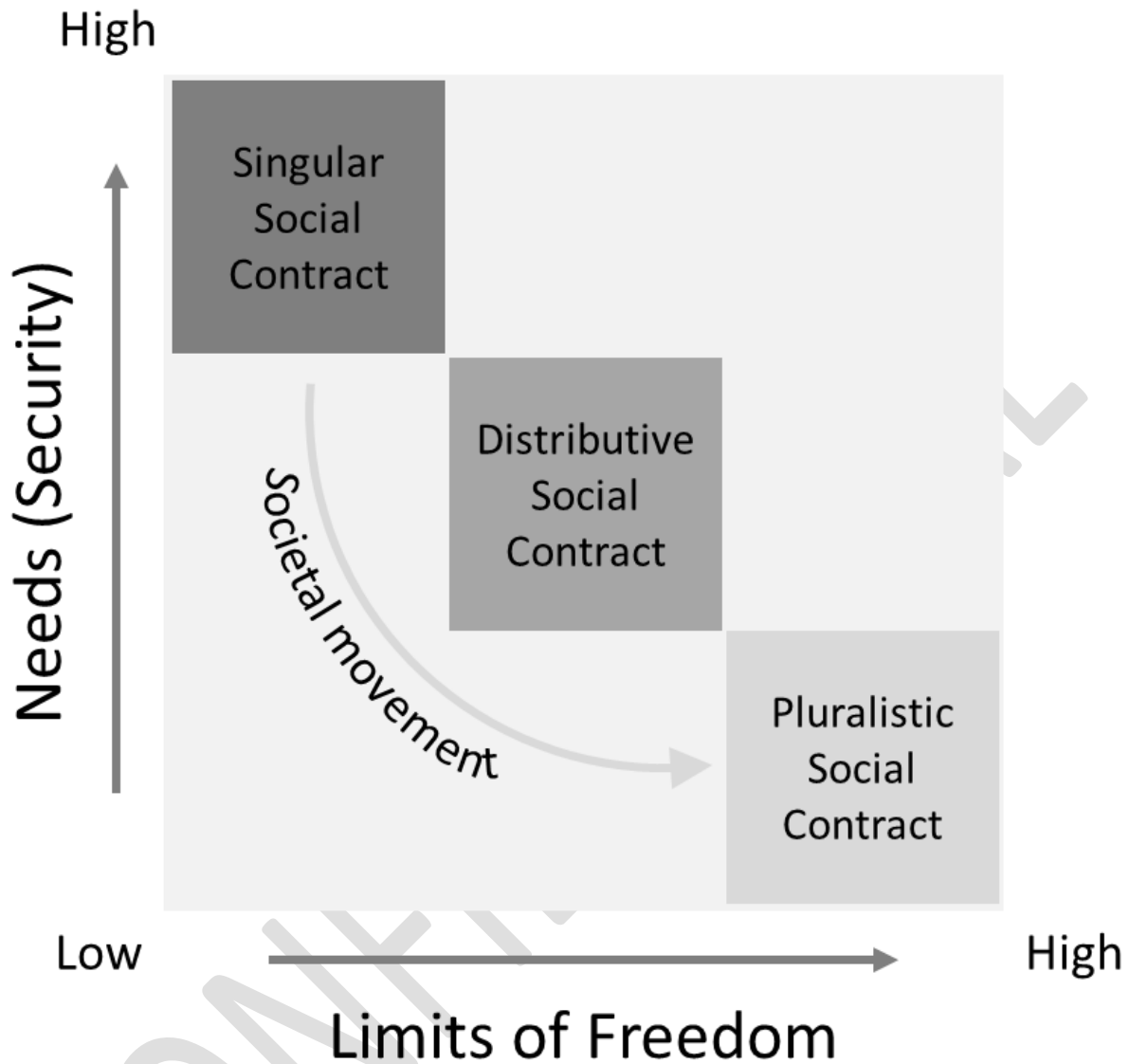
## 3. Pluralistic Social Contract

John Locke believes that it is everyone's responsibility to protect natural rights. These rights are God-given so those who trample upon these rights deserve punishment. However, there is no precedent on the quantum of punishment. The punishments may be arbitrary if left to individuals. Hence, the members of the society must institutionalise power to be a judge between people in disputes and to award punishments to the violators of natural rights. This will ensure that not only the rights of people are protected but also violators are punished according to the same precedents. Locke's social contract appeals to the judicial power as he believes that people are free in their actions while power has a limited scope of awarding punishment to violators.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon is a libertarian and founder of anarchic school of thought. His social contract is radical in approach as he is the first one to mix the elements of socialism with liberalism. He is a fierce critic of Rousseau as he believes that people do not compromise on their freedom voluntarily. Instead, he believes that rules of the social contract are made by the people themselves. Proudhon lays a lot of emphasis on individual's liberty and strongly disagrees in external stimuli to make rules. He believes that social contract arises from commerce between people. The transactions between people are governed by certain rules which are developed and implemented by people themselves. These transactions form the backbone of social contract. In Proudhon's social contract, people curtail their freedom based on their individual interactions with other people.

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From the different versions of social contract mentioned above, we can witness that freedom and security are inversely linked. The more security one wants, the more freedom they must give up. Humans at any given time must opt if they want freedom or security. The institution of power is to make rules of engagement or simply put social contract depending upon the level of freedom people are willing to give up. The responsibility of power is, nonetheless, to ensure security and protection. In any society, the need to be secure or free determines the level of social contract. The more freedom people require, the less security they get back in return and less power they yield. There are pros and cons of each social contract, but each social contract has been witnessed in our society where singular, distributive, and pluralistic approach has been adopted to ensure self-preservation.

The current regimes in Gulf region display singular social contract where highest levels of individual freedom is curtailed. Strong central body holds power which makes and governs rule of engagement. Western democracies display distributive social contract where individual freedom is curtailed by the general will of the people through electing their representatives. On the other hand, countries like Switzerland, New Zealand and Denmark display pluralistic social contract where people curtail their individual freedom minimally. They thoroughly participate in referendums to decide the principles of freedom and security. When we look towards history, we see that there is a general trend of each social contract to start from singular social contract and progress towards pluralistic social contract. Rarely a society starts from pluralistic social contract. The positioning of social contract of each society defines the levels of freedom.

When we look at King Henry VIII episode from the lens of social contract, his individual freedom to marry and choose his partner was curtailed by Pope. Only Pope could adjudicate matters pertaining to second marriage. Though, it was not only Henry but whole Catholic Europe who had entered a social contract with the Vatican. The religious authority was held singularly by The Holy See. In exchange for bowing down to the institution of Vatican, the Pope blessed the throne which imparted political security to the Kingdom. So, when Henry wanted to exercise his personal freedom to marry, he had to either break the singular social contract with Vatican and risk political uncertainty or continue to abide by rules set out by the Pope. He decided in the former and invented his own social contract governed by the Church of England. This led to the creation of heightened singular social contract in England where Henry held both political and religious power. This event had unintended consequences whose ripples were felt over a century, culminating in English Civil War.

It is pertinent to mention here that there is a general misunderstanding in modern societies that freedom is a fundamental right when reality is that it is life which is the most basic right. Freedom comes after survival of life is ensured. This is also advocated by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Freedom can satisfy ego and psychological needs, but it cannot ensure physiological need to secure life. We humans have already bartered a part of our personal freedom with personal security. We agreed to the norms of social contact whereby we culminated our freedom in the favour of living harmoniously in a society. We accepted that the option remains open for us to go back to the solitary state of nature or bow down to the powers held by the social contract. The whole purpose of social contract is to develop an uneasy alliance between the members of society so that peace can be maintained. But if someone is trying to expand the boundaries of their freedom beyond what social contract warrants then they may unknowingly be breaking the social contract. A theoretical scenario exists where we may attain unlimited freedom but that may come at an expense of our personal protection. The movie "Purge" highlighted this hypothetical state where people have unlimited freedom for a night which results in revenge killings. We also witnessed a similar mayhem unleashed in parts of Africa, Libya, and Syria. The revolutionary movements in those countries tried to expand the limits of freedom warranted by their singular social contract. These movements tried to pursue freedom beyond what their social contract entitled them to. It resulted in voiding the social contract and plunged the whole region into the state of nature. There are no laws in these countries which give people unlimited freedom. People in these countries are now free to roam, eat and enjoy lawlessness but they are

also free to fight, plunder and rape. The result is that there is a mass exodus, in the form of refugees from these regions. These refugees have landed in various parts of Europe and willingly entered another social contract prevalent in Europe. However, they stuck to the same principle of exchanging freedom with security. The refugees prioritized their personal security over living a life without rules. Though, we are seeing this happening in Africa, Libya, and Syria but humans around the world today or tomorrow will always face the same dilemma of trading freedom with security.

The current rights movement for freedom of speech and expression may have also missed the same logic that the boundaries of freedom are not limitless. Communities in every part of the world have entered varying sets of social contracts depending on the cultural, religious, historical, and political sensitivities of the region. The varying nature of these social contracts may or may not allow endless freedom unless the social contract is broken. And once, the social contract is broken, there may be unintended consequences as the one prevailing in the Middle East. So, one must know the ground realities of the social contract prevalent in the land before preaching to expand the horizons of freedom.

Lesson 1: Power is the commerce of freedom and needs.

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