

Introduction

Power Is Misunderstood

Returning to his flock after a bone-rattling storm, a shepherd sees a startling sight. In what had been undisturbed pastureland the day before lies a crevasse revealing an underground cavern. Stepping through the opening, the curious shepherd finds himself in a crypt containing an imposing bronze sculpture of a horse. Inside the statue is a cadaver wearing nothing but a gold ring. The shepherd pockets the ring and leaves. Soon afterward, he discovers that this is no ordinary ring; it's a magic ring that renders its wearer invisible. Realizing his newfound ability, the shepherd quickly plots his next moves: He makes his way to the palace, seduces the queen, murders the king, and takes control of the kingdom.

The shepherd's tale, the Ring of Gyges, appears in Plato's *Republic*,¹ dating back to the fourth century BCE. The Greek philosopher's story has captivated human imaginations across the ages. Another tale about a ring that grants invisibility, along with other more sinister powers, has managed no small feat: keeping readers engaged for more than 1,500 pages. This is none other than twentieth-century English writer J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the*

Rings, in which the One Ring corrupts its bearer with the promise of absolute dominance.

For millennia, people have told stories like the Ring of Gyges and *The Lord of the Rings*. In a folk tale from the Middle East, Aladdin, sent by an evil sorcerer to retrieve an oil lamp from an enchanted cave, discovers a genie who can grant him wishes. A Vietnamese legend recounts how King Lê Lợi liberated his people from Ming occupation in the fifteenth century, after a decade-long war, with the aid of the mythical sword Thuận Thiên (Heaven's Will). In Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* cycle, Alberich possesses a magic helmet that gives the wearer the ability to change form or become invisible. More recently, millions of readers have delighted in following Harry Potter's saga, which culminates in his search for the Deathly Hallows, a trio of enchanted objects that, together, allow their bearer to become Master of Death.

Tales of a protagonist setting out on a quest to find a magic object that will give him (or lately her) the ability to control their own destiny and triumph over evildoers exist in every culture. What these timeless stories share is also what makes them so enthralling: They are all fundamentally stories about power. The heroes and villains fight and kill to gain possession of the magic artifacts that can enable them to control not only their own fortunes, but also the behavior of others. This, after all, is what power ultimately is: *the ability to influence another's behavior*, be it through persuasion or coercion.

ENDLESSLY FASCINATING, OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

These epic stories endure because power fascinates us. It keeps us turning the pages of books, glued to the news, and binge-watching movies and TV series. Power is one of the world's most talked about, and perhaps most written about subjects because it is an inherent part of our lives. From our personal relationships and disputes at

work, to the highest levels of international diplomacy and big business, power is everywhere.

After studying and teaching this subject for two decades, we have come to realize that, despite its ubiquity—or perhaps because of it—power is still vastly misunderstood. Every fall, as students file into our classrooms at Harvard University and the University of Toronto, they seek answers to the same set of questions: How can I gain power and keep it? Why don't I feel more powerful even though I've been promoted? How can I convince people to change? Why is it so hard to stand up to abusive bosses? How can I ensure that I won't abuse power myself when I have it?

They are also concerned with what is happening around them in the world, and they wonder whether they have the potential to make a difference. In these past few years especially, we have been asked repeatedly, in various ways, why do I feel like the world is blowing up in our faces and I can't do anything to stop it?

Our classrooms aren't the only places where people come to us with such pressing questions. Our research and advising have taken us around the world, where we've heard similar concerns from people of all ages and backgrounds: teenagers to nonagenarians, some highly educated and others who never had the opportunity to learn to read. All these encounters both inside and outside the classroom have given us a unique window into how people grapple with power in places as different as a public hospital in the inner city of Rio de Janeiro, the well-appointed office of a former French president in Paris, and a bustling open-space incubator for social enterprises in New York.

Despite their great diversity, the people we've met and worked with think about power in similar ways. For the most part, they care about improving their own lives and often those of others. They want to have more control over their environment and make a difference, whether in their immediate families, their jobs, their communities, or society. Yet they find the path a rocky one. For every success they

experience, they have stories of struggle or downright defeat. Intuitively they know that power is the key to the impact they aspire to effect. But acknowledging that power is at play and understanding how it works are very different. And this brings us to the second thing people tend to have in common: Most of us have deep-seated misconceptions about power. Three fallacies, in particular, prevent many people from properly grasping it and, ultimately, being able to exercise it.

THREE PERNICIOUS FALLACIES

The first fallacy is the belief that power is a thing you possess, and that some fortunate individuals have special traits that enable them to acquire it. If you have those traits, the reasoning goes, or you can find a way to obtain them, you will always be powerful. Those special characteristics are not too different from the magic artifacts that figure in epic stories and myths; not surprisingly, people are curious to discover what these “ideal traits” are. But think about the relationships in your own life. You probably feel more in control in some of them than you do in others; and yet, most of the time you bring with you the same underlying traits and capabilities. Although personal attributes can be sources of power in certain situations, you will come to appreciate why searching for special traits that would make someone powerful always and everywhere is largely a waste of time.

The second fallacy is that power is positional, reserved for kings and queens, presidents and generals, Board members and CEOs, the rich and the famous. It’s common to mistake authority or rank for power, so common that we see it every year on the first day of class. When we ask students to list five people whom they view as powerful, 90 percent of the time they name people at the apex of some hierarchy. Yet you would be surprised by the number of top executives and CEOs who come to us because they struggle to get things done

in their organizations. They realize that being at the top is no guarantee that their teams will do what they want them to do. Comedies, from the ancient Greek plays of Aristophanes to the British Monty Python sketches, have made audiences laugh by ridiculing figures of authority, from emperors to chiefs, ministers, and puffed-up bosses. Our analysis will reveal why being at the top may well give people authority, but it doesn't necessarily give them power.

The last and perhaps most widespread misconception is that power is dirty, and that acquiring and wielding it entails manipulation, coercion, and cruelty. Literature and film abound with ghastly examples: Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* and *Iago*, Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series, and Frank and Claire Underwood in *House of Cards*. We can't look away, but we can't abide the thought of being like these characters, either. Power fascinates and repulses us at the same time. It seems like fire: bewitching, but capable of consuming us if we get too close. We fear it could make us lose our minds, or our principles. The shepherd in the Ring of Gyges transforms into a manipulative murderer, while Tolkien's One Ring turns its wearer gradually evil. In reality, there is nothing intrinsically dirty about power. Although the potential to be corrupted by it always exists, its energy is essential if we wish to achieve positive ends as well. When a third grader convinces her classmates to participate in a fundraising campaign to benefit a not-for-profit organization that cares for kids with disabilities, she is exercising power constructively. So is the manager who persuades the corporate office to give his team the resources they need to do better work in better conditions.

These three fallacies plague us individually and collectively. Individually, our confusion is the source of major frustration, because it significantly limits our ability to have control over our own lives, to influence others, and to get things done. We end up feeling at the mercy of the "politics" of our workplaces, jostled by puzzling dynamics bigger than ourselves.

Collectively, our misunderstanding of power is catastrophic, because it makes us less likely to identify, prevent, or stop abuses of power that threaten our freedoms and well-being. We risk—often without realizing it—letting our common destiny be decided by a small group of people who may have only their own interests at heart. History gives us innumerable examples of tyrants who disregarded others’ lives and liberty. Yet dictatorships continue around the globe, depriving people of basic human rights. And even within democracies, hard-won freedoms are fragile, because the risk of power becoming concentrated in the hands of a few who will fight fiercely to defend their privileges is always present.

Entrenched as these three fallacies are, and severe as their consequences can be, we know from our research and teaching experience that the real dynamics of power can be taught. Be it to resist evil or to do good, understanding how power works and what it takes to acquire and exercise it is imperative. Providing this knowledge is what set us on the journey to write this book: We want to give you the keys to unlock these dynamics so that you will be better able to wholeheartedly pursue your objectives in your relationships, workplaces, communities, and society.

THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING POWER

At the end of our course, we ask our students to look back at a time they were blindsided by power and analyze the situation using what they’ve learned. We’ve heard about the shock of being unexpectedly fired, the gloom of running for office and losing by a handful of votes, and the confusion of failing to implement a change everyone in the community seemingly supported. These situations were painful puzzles, or as one student who unexpectedly lost his job explained: “It felt like I was starring in a movie without understanding the plot.” As we debunk the three fallacies throughout the course, we witness our students slowly discovering the plot. Then, looking back, they realize

how they misread situations, how they directed their energy at the wrong manager or politician, and what the forces were that made them feel so stuck. In short, they finally see power for what it is. We want to help you do the same.

Grasping the dynamics of power is the key not only to pursuing our personal objectives, but also to participating effectively in shaping our collective future. Individual and collective power are joined at the hip. The power we are able to exercise in our personal lives, whether at work or at home, is interdependent with the political systems that govern us, the economic systems that enable and constrain us, and the ecological and biological systems of the natural world with their whims and iron laws. It's foolish to think that we can pursue our individual objectives irrespective of how the distribution of power in society affects our own power.

In uncovering the workings of power in our lives, we will see that the psychological manifestations and consequences of feeling powerful and powerless are real and important, but no accurate analysis of power can be limited to what is in your mind and how you feel. It must also account for others: who they are, the relationships you have with them, the relationships they have with each other, and the broader context within which these relationships are embedded.

To this end, we will examine the dynamics of power in organizations and in society as well as in interpersonal relationships. In doing so, we will draw on insights from our own research, which examines power at all three levels, as well as from that of others across disciplines including sociology, social and evolutionary psychology, management, political science, economics, law, history, and philosophy. Building on this rich body of knowledge, we will show you—layer by layer—the many facets of power and its manifestations through time and in our lives today.

As two women and scholars with international backgrounds—Julie is a native of France and now a French and American citizen; and Tiziana grew up in Italy, lived in the United States for years, and

then chose Canada as her home—we are acutely aware that how power is manifested and perceived varies greatly not only across time, but also across culture, gender, race, and class. To understand these variations and their implications beyond our own experiences, we conducted more than one hundred interviews with individuals on five continents with intriguing and diverse paths to and through power. Among them were a Brazilian doctor turned social entrepreneur, a Polish Holocaust survivor, an African American voting rights organizer, a Bangladeshi policeman, a Canadian investment banker, a world-famous Italian fashion designer, and a Nigerian social activist. You will hear their voices throughout this book. Their stories will help you uncover the workings of power and what it takes to use it effectively to have an impact.

GETTING STARTED ON OUR JOURNEY

More than five hundred years ago, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, a landmark treatise read to this day by people in positions of power and those who aspire to emulate them.² These are the people Machiavelli wrote for, and herein lies a key distinction between this book and texts like *The Prince*: We are not writing exclusively for and about powerful people. This book is meant for everyone, including those groups that have been historically, and still are today, excluded from power. That they have been so long denied power does not mean they cannot have it. Power can be for all.

As we will show you, recognizable elements reliably explain who has power and who doesn't in any given situation. When you can identify these elements, it is like having a pair of infrared glasses that help you see in the dark. You will be able to discern the power relationships around you, at home, at work, and in the political, economic, and cultural context where your life unfolds. Together, these elements constitute the fundamentals of power, and when power is broken down to its fundamentals, analyzing who holds it and why

depends on answering two key questions. Just two. And we will show you what it takes to answer them.

We will explain why, although power can change hands, its distribution in society is sticky, making it easy for some of us to gain, keep, and consolidate structural advantages, while clearly disadvantaging others. But as we will show you, these oppressive hierarchies can be disrupted when people take action by joining forces to fight them. New digital technologies have the potential to both facilitate and hinder this kind of collective action. Monitored carefully and used wisely, technology can give the power-disadvantaged access to resources that would otherwise be beyond their reach. Left unchecked, it can lead to ever greater concentrations of power. Technology, like power, is intrinsically neither good nor bad; its nature depends on how and for what purpose it is used. Here, as in other spheres, you will appreciate that power can ultimately be for all only if we keep it in check with mechanisms that prevent excessive concentration and hold its keepers accountable, lest they infringe on our rights and freedoms.

We have come a long way in giving more and more of us room to live our lives well, pursue our aspirations, and help others do the same. For millennia, the vast majority had to bear the whims and disregard of authoritarian rulers whose own interests and desires guided their decisions. Today, many of us live in democracies where we can express our views with our vote and decide for ourselves how we want to live. These advances happened thanks to the tireless work of people—some celebrated, most nameless—who articulated new ideas and advocated for a fairer world, even when others deemed them too radical. Nevertheless, the tides of history have left vast divides in their wake, with democracies still imperfect in giving equal voice to all, and social and economic inequalities still pervasive around the world.

If we are to survive and thrive as a species, living in harmony with each other and with our environment, we must continue the

work of previous generations who fought for power to be more fairly distributed. Engaging in this work is both a moral imperative and in our own self-interest, as it is the only way to avoid excessive power concentration and ensure our individual and collective freedoms. Thankfully, we are not starting from scratch. Far from it. As we will show you throughout this book, tested ideas and solutions have the potential to make power accessible to all.