At the Court of Chaos: Political Science in an Age of Perpetual Fear

Ira Katznelson

An anonymous late eighteenth century British painting at the Ackland Museum in Chapel Hill portrays “Satan Leaving the Court of Chaos,” a reference to Book II of John Milton’s Paradise Lost. In an assertion of demotic power, Satan, “the adversary of God and man,” travels “full fraught with mischievous revenge” from Chaos, where he is most at home, to God’s created world in order to corrupt Adam and Eve and induce original sin.

Milton portrays Chaos as possessing features that make it an acutely threatening site of confusion and danger. Chaos is normless, a place of unbridled and confusing powers. Chaos is disorderly, as the four Elements of fire, earth, air, and water originally identified by the Pre-Socratics, denoted by Plato, and expanded by Aristotle, are not differentiated or linked by methodical relationships. “In this wild abyss . . . neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire, But all these in their pregnant causes mixed Confus’dly, and which thus must ever fight.” Chaos also is distinguished by an uncertainty so pervasive, so insidious, and so deep that estimations of probabilities, sequences, and means become elusive. “Chance governs all.”

In Milton’s cosmography, Chaos did not disappear after Creation. It remains an untamed wildness, an “Illimitable ocean without bound, without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time and place are lost.” Human-kind presently inhabits a capacious court of chaos. The Second World War, “the war that never ended,” produced a compound of unprecedented violence, willful mass murder, ideological fervor, and radical versions of stateness from which we have not escaped. During the uncompro- 

mising transformations of the 1940s, fear became pervasive, persistently constitutive, both deeply particular and broadly abstract. Unlimited power joined unlimited violence when both the capacity and the willingness to make human beings superfluous—that is, to kill beyond any reasonable assessment of utility—combined in the death camps, the carpet bombing of civilians, and the development of nuclear weapons to erode conventional standards. Nuclear weaponry cannot be unlearned, and genocide is an idea and practice that travels. Almost each day, we see the effects of this loosening of constraints, an ease of killing married to passionate causes, some even just.

The Creation story in Paradise Lost tells how God supplanted the normless, disorderly, uncertain “eternal anarchy” and “confusion” of Chaos with a universe that places these elements in decent order. Few of us are believers quite like Milton. Living in a disenchanted world, our hopes for Creation, as it were, must lie with a modernized liberal tradition, the tradition within which political science resides.

As a product of liberal modernism, political science has been invested in the purposes of Enlightenment and liberalism—with their ideas, institutions, normative appeal and achievements, but also, if less often, with their deficiencies and dark underside. This zone of ideas and institutions, to borrow the Derridean phrase of Dipesh Chakrabarty, is “both indispensable and inadequate.” Who amongst us would prefer a world lacking toleration, pluralism, government by consent, institutionalized representation, political rights, and a commitment to reason? But who amongst us is not aware that enlightened cultivation and liberal development far too often have gone hand in hand with denials of eligibility and membership, with deep inequalities of assets and respect, and have proved insufficient as guardians of peace, privacy, and freedom, especially when placed under illiberal pressure?

Like western liberalism—indeed, as a part of it—political science is both indispensable and inadequate. Indispensable because the knowledge it offers can help us confront, understand, and, to a degree, guard against unreason and
depredation. Compared to the 1940s, every part of political science is more robust, having come to possess more exacting means and having gained more precise knowledge about a wide range of important issues. Inadequate, though, because we hold habits of mind, method, and manner that can make it difficult for us to achieve these increasingly urgent tasks. Too often, the discipline has been aseptic, even serene, sometimes lacking urgency or purpose beyond the aesthetic appeal of scientific inquiry well-done.

In light of this situation and with these legacies, and in an effort to draw some lessons for scholarship under current circumstances, I consider, as one source of provision, a rather dormant part of our scholarly inheritance—writings on power composed during the early 1940s to the mid-1950s that were stimulated by that moment’s remarkable conditions of emergency and sweeping historical change. As key features of those circumstances remain in place, I suggest that we might learn and selectively borrow from their patrimony.

**Historical Fracture**

"Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear."9 This is the opening sentence in Philip Roth’s extraordinary novel, *The Plot Against America*, the story he tells from the counterfactual premise that Franklin Roosevelt lost his quest for a third presidential term to the isolationist Charles Lindberg, who first had achieved the status of a hero in 1927 when he piloted the *Spirit of St. Louis* from Long Island to Paris. Lindberg, of course, never achieved the presidency, but he did make five visits to Nazi Germany in the 1930s, attended the opening ceremony of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, and, even after the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that extruded Germany’s Jews from civil, economic, and political society, characterized Hitler as “undoubtedly a great man . . . having far more character and vision than . . . painted in so many different ways by accounts in America and England."10 In 1938, Air Marshal Hermann Goering, Hitler’s designated successor and Germany’s own pilot hero, presented Lindberg with a medallion ornamented with four swastikas, the Service Cross of the German Eagle, to honor foreigners for service to the Third Reich.11 On September 11, 1941, six decades before the day that so powerfully has affected present lives, with Hitler threatening Britain after the conquests and occupation of Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and France, and with the Final Solution now underway, Lindberg singled out “the Jewish race” at an America First Committee rally he addressed in Des Moines, as “one of the most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war.” He cautioned that “instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way, for they will be among the first to feel its consequences. . . . We cannot blame them for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests,” he declared in his own statement of extrusion, “but we must also look out for ours.”12 Lindberg’s imagined emergence to the center of American political life and power, Roth wrote, “assaulted, as nothing ever had before, that huge endowment of personal security I had taken for granted as an American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world.”13

I do not know if Roth was thinking about Immanuel Kant’s 1795 text, “Perpetual Peace” when he wrote about ‘perpetual fear,’ but I suspect he was.14 Kant had stressed the sanctity of treaties, had advanced a principle of non-interference, a global federation of free and republican states, and a norm of universal hospitality. He also had advocated the ultimate abolition of standing armies. By the time Roth’s story unfolded, Kant’s vision had become innocent and credulous. In light of the bloodshed in Europe’s extended wars of religion, what Kant meant by war in the last decade of the eighteenth century might just have foreseen the level of violence and killing that marked the Napoleonic wars, the American Civil War, or even conceivably the unprecedented slaughter of combatants in the First World War. But he could not possibly have anticipated the full breadth and scope of barbarism and carnage that came to characterize the fifth decade of the twentieth century.

Roth’s dystopia dates the ‘perpetual fear’ he first experienced to 1940—before the United States had entered the war, before the crematoria, before the firestorm obliteration of whole cities like Dresden and Tokyo or the house by house wasting of others including Kiev and Warsaw, and before the application of nuclear physics had placed quite ordinary human rulers in the position of the God of Milton, who asked in *Paradise Lost*, “what if all Her stores were opened, and this firmament Of hell should spout her cataracts of fire?”15 The fanaticism, levels of violence and wanton depravity achieved in the next half-century were beyond belief. Only afterward, in the shadows of a truly global total war claiming at least 36 million lives by conservative estimate, a majority civilian;16 of the Holocaust’s quest for moral as well as physical annihilation, the ultimate repudiation of human pluralism and toleration; and of the development and use of God-like weaponry did a new epoch in the human experience begin. Only then was it absolutely clear, as Leszek Kolakowski has put the point, that “evil is not contingent. It is not the absence of deformation, or subversion of virtue . . . but a stubborn and unredeemable fact.”17 Only then did all humankind, even its most advantaged, fall within the ambit of a permanent fear.

Of course, cruelty and atrocity on a massive scale had been integral to much human history, dating back to pre-state communities. In more modern times, the bloodshed of intra-Christian religious warfare, the conquest of the
New World, the expropriation of native peoples, the worldwide traffic in slaves, the insult and deformations of colonialism, the killing fields of the late Ottoman Empire, the scope and intensity of the First World War, and the detention and labor camps of the Soviet Gulag and the Great Terror all had predated the 1940s. From within the advantaged West, however, each of these massive instances of brutality inflicted rough treatment and fear either on outsiders or the “other.” They were contained by distance or by time, and sustained by willful or involuntary ignorance—each of which preserved the illusion and reality of normal politics.

Seen from this perspective, five interrelated aspects of the situation initiated or culminating in the Second World War were utterly new: A first set of these elements producing a radical historical fracture concerns the vulnerability of non-combatants and the instruments of violence. However terrible, and it was terrible, the First World War had been relatively benign. With the exceptions of Serbia and Belgium, it was fought mainly as a rural conflagration, leaving Europe’s populations, cultural heritage, and great cities in place and intact. By contrast, a significant majority of injuries and deaths now were inflicted not on combatants but civilians. City after city, by war’s end, not just in Europe but in Asia, lay in ruins. And even before the inevitable diffusion of the relevant knowledge and capacity, the very existence of the first nuclear bombs utterly transformed the human condition. The rain of actual and potential destruction had grown more intense, more widespread, more promiscuous. And there was no turning back.

The second element was the profound devaluation of human life. The Nazi killing fields and factories of death fashioned a novel model of willfully comprehensive mass murder, lacking instrumental purpose, that mobilized perfectly average individuals to fulfill its tasks, the “ordinary men” of Christopher Browning’s disturbing account of the horrific actions in Poland performed by Germany’s Reserve Police Battalion 101. It was Hannah Arendt who best understood the core of this system to be human superfluousness. “We may say,” she wrote in The Origins of Totalitarianism, “that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have been made equals.” With the appearance of this organized depravity, she continued, “we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.”

Third was the transformation and deepening of predatory stateness. Whether dictatorial or liberal, modern national states always include three elements: a claim to sovereign omnipotence, to unitary and unchallenged control over a given territory and a subject population; an ensemble of institutions with which to control and govern those territories and populations, including armed forces, tax systems, and mechanisms of participation and welfare; and normative stories about why this set of arrangements is good and just. But the era’s totalitarian impulse added a self-satisfied claim to totalism. As Giovanni Gentile, the fascist theorist, writing under Mussolini’s name in 1932 for the Encyclopedia Italiana, put the point, what distinguished the new anti-liberal model featuring a brew of intense nationalism, cults of purity and unity, redemptive violence, and the repression of liberty was a state that “is all-embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist.” Thus understood, “fascism is totalitarian.” This model of politics, a leading historian of such regimes has written, offered “a radically intrusive state run by people who do not merely control their citizens from the outside, preventing them from challenging the elite or doing things that it does not like, but also attempt to reach the most intimate regions of their lives . . . to make these subjects into beings who would be constitutionally incapable of challenging the rule of the state and those who control it.”

Fourth was a perversion of the democratic impulse. The new dictatorships created a movement-centered polity via a privileged party—Fascist, Nazi, Communist—as the mobilizing hinge connecting the state to society and society to the state. Each such faction predated its command of the national state. Each was an armed militia challenging the state’s legitimate monopoly of the means of violence. Each deemed itself more worthy than the state it sought to subsume and govern. Each asserted a claim to permanent power and to absolute authority. Each had leaders who declared themselves to be intellectuals who could discern, shape, and transform the course of history beyond its ordinary limits. Combining moral and historical certainty, each composed a holistic moral universe, convening cultural, material, and political power.

Fifth was the inclusiveness and ferocity of a range of ideologies that united purpose, visions of normative and material bounty, and hyper-rationality with irrationalism, emotion, and mass appeal. Expressing utopian ambitions in texts and slogans, architecture and art, science and eschatology, law and cults of personality, various systems of thought fused with passion discovered and destroyed putative enemies. The friend-enemy distinction was taken further than before, to a pathological extreme not softened by the claims of caring, paternalism, and tutelage characteristic of the earlier discourses of slave owners and imperial rulers. This brew of reason and unreason legitimated the most brutal and wanton acts.

Before, even deep instances of human suffering could be overcome. Slavery could be abolished. Imperialism could be replaced by decolonization. Progress could be imagined and achieved. But now, with radically enlarged models, means, and prospects of vast killing fields, domestic and international politics were conditioned by a new frightening and permanent amplification of danger and fear at a
moment, ironically, when much else did, in fact, project toward possibilities of improvement. Everyday politics came to live atop a plateau of unprecedented and awful apprehension. Only then did the human condition—our condition—come to resemble what the Satan of Paradise Lost liked so much: the “Wide anarchy of Chaos warm and dark,” the “dark and dismal house of pain.”

We continue to be powerfully constituted by each of these facets of modern times. We are wounded, permanently wounded. The deeply threatening bi-polar nuclear standoff of the Cold War years has been replaced by a diffusion of the means of ultimate violence, and the clear likelihood that in the generation of our children and grandchildren the possession of such weapons will be enjoyed not just by many states but perhaps by non-state movements and militias. Only buoyant fools can feel sure such armaments will remain harnessed. Further, with technological refinement, the ratio of violence to armed forces has continued to alter. Spending just about 3 percent of GDP, today’s incredibly potent American military is relatively small, with only a 1.4 million all-volunteer force under arms (compared to 16 million in the Second World War, when the country had half the current population). It is, the historian David Kennedy has pointed out, “exceptionally lean and extraordinarily lethal . . . History’s most powerful military force can now be sent into battle in the name of a society that scarcely breaks a sweat when it does so.” With this development of the technological prowess set in motion during the Second World War, he notes, we have created a “method of warfare that neither asks nor requires any large-scale personnel or material contributions from the citizens on whose behalf that force is deployed.” He thus worries, as should we, about how “the present structure of civil-military relations constitutes a standing temptation to the kind of military adventurism that the Founders feared was among the greatest dangers of standing armies—a danger embodied in their day in the career of Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Thomas Jefferson described as having transferred the destinies of the republic from the civil to the military arm.”

The revolution to the human condition produced by the organization of genocidal human superfluousness that Arendt designated as the very core of radical evil, moreover, has demonstrated no history of containment. Though features of the Holocaust remain unique, there have been all too many later mutations of genocide or killing with genocidal qualities, often directed with brutal organized fury against ethnic or religious or ideological enemies, marked by armed fervor and novel forms of murder. It looked for a time as if the demise of Communism might mean, if not the end of history, at least the death of totalitarianism with a capital “T,” and ideology with a capital “I.” The party-state gave the impression of being on its way out. Adam Michnik, the leading Polish dissident in Communist times, could celebrate the triumph of a politics of gray, opposed not just to red or brown but even to more limited divisions separating left from right. When it came to power, the Iranian Revolution seemed more like an atavistic throwback than the harbinger of an increasingly widespread mobilization of armed religious fervor or attempts at totalistic rule. The Tamil Tiger insurgency’s technique of bombs delivered by self-immolating human beings seemed to be as an odd exception to more modern forms of conflict and resistance. Even when they do not appear in raw or full form, features of totalism, ideological energy, political hubris, polarization, intolerant mobilization, and efforts to ride roughshod over liberal values and protections continually reemerge. Unsettling an already unsettled world, these legacies from the 1940s threaten decency in a wide array of polities, uncomfortably including our own.

Most of the time, we repress, possibly as we must, the perpetual fear these circumstances confer because to do otherwise is to live unendingly either in the world of Dr. Strangelove or in a state of paralysis. As political scientists, we get on with things. Arguably, we have little choice but to continue to deploy our kitbag of qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical means to study regimes, rules, institutions, opinion, lawmaking, participation, and even warfare as if the radical break of the mid-twentieth century had not happened. Yet, manifestly, customary and conventional political science is insufficient to comprehend the implications of this multifaceted change convened some six and seven decades ago, or to understand the permanent crisis it inaugurated. To be sure, as a discipline, we possess distinguished specialists in relevant topics—in geopolitics, national security, and violent conflict of various kinds, including ethnic wars and mass killing. But we treat these subjects as distinct domains, as special areas of expertise rather than as contextual variables for virtually everything else that we study, often missing the point the historian John Lewis Gaddis made in a recent discussion of context and causality when he observed that “a misstep on a mountain path is more dangerous than one that takes place in the middle of a meadow.”

Today, all our missteps are, as it were, on a steep mountain, yet we too often write as if we are simply strolling in a meadow.

Power Considered

We need more than one means to help conduct us on such a precipitous path. One support to which I am drawn is the markedly criticized and largely neglected literature on power written during and soon after the Second World War, just before the more systematic and exacting behavioral study of power relations took flight. At a moment when a concern for the relationship between stateness and radical evil was palpable, that earlier generation urgently sought to bind the analysis of power to an account of each
of the key aspects of modern states in order to explore whether rules could be found to tame their most dangerous and predatory features.

Not long before, in the interwar years, the discipline had begun to think about power apart from the national state. This artificial distinction had been forcefully introduced into the discipline in the 1930s, hand in hand with the earliest moments of the behavioral revolution. A programmatic statement written in 1934 by Frederick Watkins, then a member of Harvard University’s Society of Fellows and later a distinguished colleague at Yale, crisply condenses this position. “The proper scope of political science,” he encouraged, “is not the study of the state . . . but the investigation of all associations insofar as they can be shown to exemplify the problem of power.” In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, this proposal to separate considerations of power from analyses of the modern state simply seemed inconceivable.32

When I was doing research for a book on political knowledge in the postwar period, I came across a notable Columbia University faculty seminar, lasting a decade from 1945 to 1955. Motivated by fearfulness about the stability and capacity of liberal democracy in the United States under conditions of tension and emergency, its members included Richard Hofstadter and William Leuchtenburg from History; Robert Merton, Seymour Martin Lipset, and C. Wright Mills from Sociology; the political theorist Franz Neumann; and students of American political behavior, including Richard Neustadt and David Truman. Refusing Watkins’ distinction between studies of the state and behavioral analyses of power, this intellectual forum called itself the Seminar on the State. Committed to Enlightenment and to the values of the western liberal tradition, they wished to find instruments in political theory, in behavioral studies, and in policy analysis to emancipate “American liberalism from naiveté,” and craft a varied political science to perform acts of guardianship that might help defend humankind against danger, oppression, and brutality.33

In writing about power under the conditions of a radical break in human affairs, the mid-century scholars worked at the boundary that both separated and linked normal politics to the new conditions of perpetual fear. They were keen to understand the imbrication of power and violence at the core of sovereignty. They wished to know how institutional frameworks shaped behavior and how behavior changed institutions. They tried to appreciate how schooling, propaganda, and other normative instruments were utilized by states to elicit consent and to mobilize support. They knew, in short, that any separation of the study of power from the study of the state made little sense, for political power is exercised and defined in contests about sovereignty, normative legitimation, and the contours of key institutions—the rules for transactions that govern the links between the state and its population, the state and the economy, and the state and other states, the very subjects with which the modern liberal tradition has been concerned. The most bracing work from this period also considered power as integral to the analysis of inequality and stratification, and as an indispensable tool for understanding and evaluating contemporary democracy.

A leading example is The Power Elite, the uneven, fiery, vulnerable, elusive, often infuriating, but brilliant text by Wright Mills. Working in this vein, he famously portrayed American society as divided into three: an atomized mass—ordinary people “without power” who “live in a time of big decisions” but “know they are not making any,” and whose lives “often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern”; decision makers who deal with mid-level problems, where the “assumptions of a plurality of independent, relatively equal, and conflicting groups of the balancing society” hold sway; and “higher circles” composed of the top leaders who run the corporations, the centralized state, and the military who “are in positions to make decisions having major consequences.”34 “By the power elite,” he wrote, “we refer to those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences. In so far as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them.”35

For sure, Mills’ book was vulnerable to criticism for slack conceptualization and uneven empirical support for his hypotheses. As a Weberian, he stressed bureaucratization—how “the typical institutional unit has become enlarged, has become administrativaive, has become centralized”—thus increasing “the means of power at the disposal of decision-makers.”36 But he treated bureaucracy simply and uniformly, as if administrative hierarchies themselves create capacity with content. As a follower of Pareto and Mosca, he stressed the interrelatedness of experience and social background that binds the leaders of these hierarchies into a singular elite, what he called the “psychological and social bases for their unity, resting upon the fact that they are of similar social type and leading to the fact of their easy intermingling,” as well as their sharing of prestige and the circulation from one hierarchy to another, “with many interconnections and points of coinciding.”37 But the book’s categorization of elite members hardly is crisp. Its assumptions about a line of connection between social background to policy preferences are underspecified. The mechanisms linking patterns of recruitment to patterns of decision, or concerning the means of coordination linking members of the power elite across spheres and issues, likewise are not spelled out satisfactorily. Further, Mills was relatively uninterested in ideas and ideology, was curiously silent about the play of politics, and ignored the impact of segregation and racism on American life, the period’s biggest domestic question.
Despite such limitations, in looking unflinchingly at the new conditions humanity faced after the Second World War, especially those that concerned large-scale violence, *The Power Elite* contained features of method and substance that should continue to attract interest and regard. Unlike later more careful and systematic, but also less audacious, work on power, including *Who Governs?,* Robert Dahl’s landmark account of decision-making in New Haven, *The Power Elite* forced attention to deep challenges for its time that remain fresh and pressing for ours. Mills thought about power as a means to understand analytical problems and empirical puzzles distinctive to an age of perpetual fear, thus raising questions as vital now as they were then.

Much of the later behavioral scholarship on power focused primarily on the relationship between power exercised in action about specific policies with the effect of getting other actors to conform to the preferences of the decision-maker even if they otherwise would not have chosen that course, or on power as the ability to control the very agenda about which decisions are being made. In the helpful language of Steven Lukes, this literature contrasted a one-dimensional view insisting that power can be recognized in observable decision-making behavior with a second dimensional perspective that added the idea of power as the ability to restrict the content of what gets decided.

More recently, political theory has been the main site of discussions of power, at a moment when the behavioral approach in both of its dimensions has come to seem exhausted and the earlier empirical work largely forgotten. This scholarship has been more concerned with what Lukes has called power’s third dimension, a compliance to domination via the fastening of consent. In this sense, power entails a restriction of freedom by rendering actual and potential choices invisible and by making existing social, economic, and political relations seem natural. This dimension is denoted by Lukes as the capacity, across a wide array of contexts and substantive issues, “to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things.” It is this emphasis on the distortion of judgment that makes Lukes’ study “radical in both the theoretical and political senses,” placing it broadly in the same zone as Antonio Gramsci’s complex notion of hegemony and Michel Foucault’s emphasis on the pervasiveness of power, to show how power can determine human identity and subjectivity and imprison populations in a universe of subjection.

Presciently, Mills was interested in each of the three types of power: how decisions get taken, and by whom; how agendas are shaped and limited; and how, in what he characterized as mass society, individuals are rendered relatively powerless and compliant, if also puzzled and concerned. As social science, *The Power Elite* represented an effort to specify and situate these aspects of power in time and place. Mills’ book was a historical application of these concerns, historical in the sense of trying to come to terms with the massive changes that had occurred in the prior decade. He was concerned to bind the study of power to an account of the modern state as a set of institutions in a dangerous world that link the national state to the economy, to its citizenry, and to other states. Probing these subjects not as alternatives to the scientific study of the three dimensions of power but as means to deploy them, Mills produced both a scholarly and a public provocation to highlight how much had changed under the new conditions that had taken root in the 1940s, thus specifying these elements in time, place, and content.

Analytically, Mills wished to better understand how constraint and agency intertwined in each of its aspects by treating power as a tiered variable, each level of which is defined by a field of tension established by poles of structure and action. As an historical application of these matters insisting that more traditional theories of balance had become inadequate in the face of the massive changes that had come about in the prior decade, *The Power Elite* took care to focus not just on the process but the content of power, by distinguishing questions that now stood out as especially important from more ordinary issues that merely exist at what he called the middle levels of power where Congress is especially important. Decisions, Mills contended, should not be studied as if on a single plane, or without attention to their particular degree of significance in a given historical epoch. Writing in 1956, he thus identified a limited set of especially pivotal judgments, naming “the dropping of the A-bombs over Japan,” “the decision on Korea,” and the judgment not to rescue the French at Dienbienphu.

This account of power offered an appraisal of the character and capacity of American liberalism, including the role of the legislature, the heart of any liberal polity. Mills wished to understand how the era’s transformations threatened constitutional politics, most of all the competence and role of Congress. In this way, he elaborated the contemporaneous observation offered by Denis Brogan, Professor of Political Science at Cambridge University, then Britain’s leading student of American affairs, who noted that what he called the “constitutional turning point of no return” had come not when President Truman had decided to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but on “the day when Senator Truman’s investigators were turned away from the Manhattan Project.”

Mills’ critics were not convinced. Robert Dahl argued in 1958 that Mills’ claims had yet to be demonstrated because evidence for the existence of a ruling elite can only be determined by examining the process of decision making in concrete cases. In his view, such “evidence has not been properly examined” to show how across a range
of instances the putatively dominant group regularly prevails despite running counter to the preferences of others. Dahl speculated, albeit without the slightest offer of evidence, that such an empirical examination about missile programs would not reveal the military to be “a homogeneous group, to say nothing of their supposed coalition with corporate and political executives.” He believed, instead, that the Pentagon either is “incredibly incompetent in administering its own fundamental affairs or else it is unconcerned with the success of its policies,” adding, moreover, that the burden of proof lay more with Mills than with a more pluralist alternative. Notwithstanding, Dahl did concede that there might well be variation across categories of policy, and that it is possible to discover “that a system approximates a true ruling elite system, to a greater or lesser degree, without insisting that it exemplify the extreme and limiting case.”

The other leading critical assessment of The Power Elite, by the sociologist Daniel Bell, was both more emphatic in its critique of methodology and more categorical in its dismissal of Mills’ cases of key decisions. Writing off The Power Elite as a Balzacian “comedy of morals,” Bell excoriated Mill for stressing what the members of his decision-making elite share in common rather than underscoring their differences. Further, Bell observed that “It is quite striking . . . that all the decisions [Mills] singles out as the ‘big decisions’ are connected with violence . . . with the commitment or refusal to go to war.” Conceding that these are, in fact, ‘big decisions,’ Bell nonetheless found the observation to be trite, writing that “to say that the leaders of a country have a constitutional responsibility to make crucial decisions is a fairly commonplace statement,” noting that these matters constitutionally fall within the purview of the president, and thus within the ambit of standard politics. Thus, he concluded, “it is difficult to see what Mills’s shouting is about.”

In light of present conundrums, this reduction of questions of such immense scope to a banality, and of the extraordinary to the commonplace, is not terribly persuasive. For sure, as Bell stressed, lots of politics, including labor issues and tax policy, fall into what Mills called the middle level. But in the historical circumstances in which Mills was writing, it hardly seems to have been either an analytical or empirical mistake to focus on how judgments had been and were being made about total war, nuclear weapons, and the deployment of American forces in Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan. To argue that a president is responsible for issues of war and peace, moreover, hardly answers some of the most fundamental questions that trouble constitutional democracies. As I write, we are grappling with just such issues. Does Article II of the Constitution of the United States, for example, give, or not give, the president the power to take without restriction any person he defines to be an enemy combatant? Can he order wiretapping on citizens without warrants or probable cause, and without legislative authority?

With the advantages conferred by another half-century of American and global history, it seems remarkably disappointing that such talented scholars as Dahl and Bell elided or made light of the most fundamental practical and normative questions raised by Mills, even as they identified limitations in his particular text. Even more vexing than their reluctance to face up to such questions at the time was the continuing reluctance by most subsequent students of power during the heyday of behavioral studies to refine, test, and improve on the questions Mills and other leading scholars of the period, including Harold Lasswell at the peak of his career and, indeed, a younger Robert Dahl had asked about the epoch’s far-reaching transformations.

It was Lasswell, of course, who first opened this conversation in a prophetic essay published on the eve of American participation in the Second World War that considered “the possibility that we are moving toward a world of garrison states—a world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society.” He offered this view in what he called a developmental construct, a model of a tendency he discerned to cross cut ordinary politics that are dominated, in contrast, by specialists in bargaining. What was new, he insisted, is a preoccupation with peril, “the socialization of danger,” the joining of an old form, the state for which military affairs are central, to unprecedented technological means and to a more unequal distribution of power. This combination, he acutely observed, encompasses a much wider range of concerns, including industrial production, technical skill, personnel management, and public relations, than those traditionally associated with military preparedness, leading to “the seeming paradox that, as modern states are militarized, specialists on violence are more preoccupied with the skills and attitudes judged characteristic of nonviolence.”

In April 1956, Denis Brogan delivered the Walter Shepherd lecture at Ohio State, a series previously addressed by Charles Beard, Max Lerner, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., James Reston, and William O. Douglas. Brogan’s acridulous topic was “Democratic Government in an Atomic Age.” Observing that “for the first time in American history, the direct interests of the United States cover every region of the globe,” he discerned the “persistent importance of military chiefs in the American polity,” and how “the soldier, the sailor is now deeply involved in politics, which are not the mere politics of the advice and consent of the Senate to promotions.” Brogan argued that little “could be more difficult . . . than driving down the narrow path between crippling distrust of the executive and an abdication of all criticism before the necessary fact of executive discretion and power.” Noting the impossibility of returning “the atom bomb back into Pandora’s box from which the government of the United States snatched it,” he underlined
how even the relatively new concept of total war now had to be revised radically. “The coming of atomic fission,” he declared, “has changed the problem in depth, urgency, and difficulty.” He concluded that “we shall live in an Iron Age. . . . And that Iron Age will only be tolerable and safe if we are willing to recast our habits of thought, and to seek to find new ways of securing the supremacy of the civil power in which the framers of the Constitution, the makers of the Anglo-American tradition, rightly saw the key to freedom and fruitful victory.”

These themes reverberated in a short but powerful paper Robert Dahl had published two years earlier to open a special issue of The Annals on the impact of atomic energy. Arguing that in this new and vital area of public affairs “the political processes of democracy do not operate. He cited as “distinguishing characteristics” of atomic policy what he called its “incalculable importance,” the “significantly smaller” elite in this area, and the practice of secrecy. Together, these traits had produced a situation, Dahl cautioned, in which “the control of such decisions is a kind of indigestible element in the operation of American democratic politics” adding that it “symbolizes an era in which the opportunities for popular control have generally dwindled,” and a situation in which “the institutionalization of secrecy had concentrated, in the hands of a few people, control over decisions of a great magnitude for the values of a larger number of persons than in all probability were ever affected by any old-fashioned authoritarian leader.” Observing that “alternative policies of great import are undoubtedly being debated at present within the tiny policy elite that controls decisions,” and how democracy “even in the limited sense” has been “displaced,” Dahl concluded in terms a good deal closer to Wright Mills than to his later critique of The Power Elite or his account of decision-making in Who Governs?, stating that “atomic energy appears to be one of a growing class of situations for which the traditional democratic processes are rather unsuitable and for which traditional theories of democracy provide no rational answer.”

An Organization of Possibilities

The recognition by Mills, Lasswell, Brogan, and Dahl that the new circumstances during and just after the Second World War, including new weapons, had created a growing class of such conditions and had recast and destabilized familiar aspects of politics and political power, rendering them dizzying, is precisely what most subsequent studies of power did not incorporate as a constitutive feature. In tune with the advice Watkins had offered in 1934, they continued to sever considerations of the state and other large-scale structures from studies of power. This disregard, moreover, has not been mitigated by some recent trends in the discipline. Scholarship about politics in the United States, both in rational choice and historical institutionalism, has been all too quiet about such subjects and conditions, associating studies of power less with the postwar generation’s efforts to grapple with perpetual fear than with a later and more placid behavioral mainstream that it has wished to transcend.

The result has been an unfortunate intellectual vacuum for political science at today’s court of chaos, a void that would surprise the post-war students of power. Consider how, in the spirit of Columbia University Seminar on the State, David Truman charged The Governmental Process in 1951 with anxiety about what he called “moribund politics.” Under the conditions that had developed in the recent past, this study of interest groups cautioned that “no political system is proof against decay and dissolution.” While “the existence of a going polity” is a mark of “present effectiveness . . . it does not justify the projection of a present equilibrium into the indefinite future.”

Read with these fretful concerns in mind, the manner in which Truman castigated dominant strands in the discipline in his APSA presidential address of 1965 comes into clearer view. He made the case that political scientists disappointingly had been “blandly optimistic and unreflectively reformist,” unthoughtful about the status of normal politics, “taking their properties and requirements for granted,” and indebted to “an unexamined and mostly implicit conception of political change and development.” Truman was particularly concerned that the behavioral paradigm, within which he was a leading member, was in danger of replicating the limits of pre-Second World War political science after the turn against “the abstract formalism of the earlier period.” With exceptions to be sure, that new scholarship, he recalled, had “adopted an equally confining and in some ways even more rigid mode of concrete description. Without an explicit concern for political systems as such, without an interest in the patterns and directions of political change, without some commitment to theory, and with a compulsion to raw empiricism and parochial concerns, the narrowness of this political science was virtually inescapable.” These inadequacies, he observed, had been challenged by “the drastically altered character of world politics,” including “the reality of nuclear weapons,” and thus had conducted powerful work about political regimes based on a revival of interest in both normative and positive theory, more fluid movement across sub-fields of political science and across the lines separating disciplines, and a mood of “restless searching” about big questions married to scientific standards and advanced methods. Fearful that such impulses might prove ephemeral, he devoted his hortatory remarks to an appeal for a political science of range and power about questions that matter.

Read alongside the vital and insistent work on power written in this spirit during and shortly after the Second World War by Truman’s cohort, even the best of the
subsequent literature seems both over-ambitious and substantively truncated. It is more conceptual and more interested in generalizable lessons and portable hypotheses. It has also been less historical and less concerned with the impact of large-scale change on political mechanisms and processes. Even the richest empirical works written in the heyday of case studies of power, and even the least “blandly optimistic and unreflectively reformist,” including, as examples, Matthew Crenson’s *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution* and John Gaventa’s *Power and Powerlessness*, were written to extract general lessons and propositions about pluralism, non-decision-making, and mechanisms of domination without sufficiently expressed curiosity about historical and contextual scope conditions.

By contrast, the older literature on which I have been dwelling took history more seriously. Mills, for example, made clear that he was not looking for or identifying a model of power characteristic of prior times or other democracies. Rather, his subject was power in “the history of our epoch.” Insisting that “it is not my thesis that for all epochs of human history and in all nations, a creative minority, a ruling class, an omnipotent elite, shape all historical events,” and reminding his readers that the degree of “foresight and control” by people with decision-making capacities over large-scale structural and policy matters can vary, he insisted that “not all epochs are equally fateful,” so that rigorous analysis requires for each a distinctive application of a configuration of possible models of structure, power, and decision. Answers must be worked out “for every epoch and for every social structure.” In asking whether “the elite determine the roles they enact,” or whether “the roles that institutions make available to them determine the power of the elite,” Mills maintained that “no general answer is sufficient,” as “in different kinds of structures and epochs elites are quite differently related to the roles that they play.”

Likewise, rather than search for historical constants or invariant relations among variables, Lasswell sought to show how a radical change in context can reorganize, among other matters, patterns of bargaining, the role of the military, and the restrictions placed on rulers in democratic life. Similarly, both Brogan and Dahl wished to understand how a particular feature of their time, the development of atomic power, affected the political process.

Instead of utilizing history to find evidence for or illustrate theory, in short, these scholars sought to develop the kind of theory that can interrogate history and make sense of its particular qualities without assuming that any given pattern or character of power is transferable from time to time, from place to place, from context to context, or from one substantive area to another. Fortunately, we do not lack for diverse models of power—thanks to a half-century of subsequent conceptual and empirical work we have a good many more tools at our command than they—but we have too little specification of these models with proper names and actual history, including particular epochal or geographic circumstances, specific structures of constraint, or enough attention to the substantive content of power.

As a result, we are sometimes asked to make choices pitched at an analytical or conceptual level that, as historically-aware political scientists, we would do well to refuse, choices that lie outside precise specifications of time, place, and subject. Is the system open or the agenda manipulated? Is power constituted by action or by potential action, the ability to act? Is subjectivity so confined by invisible power or by large-scale structures as to dissolve into determination, or is power essentially a matter of human agency, and thus of personal responsibility?

In the original 1974 edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes resisted attempts to place power within the ambit of structural determination. He took as his main example of what not to do the class-oriented conception of Nicos Poulantzas that stressed the ensemble of situations, institutions, and social relationships that constrict understanding and action in capitalist society. In the recent extended edition, Lukes also critiques what he calls the “ultra-radical” view of Foucault, at least before his writings on governmentality, along the same lines for its account of how the various fields of power, alone or in constellation, make human subjects; power, for Foucault, constitutes individuals and their actions, rather than being constituted by their behavior and choice.

By contrast, Lukes writes that “my claim . . . is that to identify a given process as an ‘exercise of power,’ rather than as a case of structural determination, is to assume that it is in the exerciser’s or exerciser’s power to act differently.”

Yet why decide such matters conceptually, as if the same answer must hold for each and every situation? An alternative could reason about power much the way J.P. Nettl famously thought of the state as a layered conceptual variable and as a means to interrogate historical circumstances. If we were to work on power in this vein, we would identify not only power’s various types, but we would array each of its dimensions on a continuum defined by constraint and possibility as a means to interrogate power in historical time, leaving such questions open for situational and content-rich investigation. For each of the three dimensions of power Lukes identifies, we might place a strong agent-centered view of power at one end of a continuum and a strong structure-centered view at the other, knowing that most situations are located at particular points in the space in-between.

Even very powerful individuals can find themselves having to make decisions under extreme constraint, dramatically contracting the sense of what it means to choose. In other circumstances, they might be free not only to select among a repertoire of alternatives but to take epochal
decisions, judgments about matters of such significance that, in the language of the philosophers Sidney Morgenbesser and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, they would be opting, not just picking or choosing. Agendas can be controlled behaviorally and willfully, but also by circumstance and structure, so that some questions become impossible to ask not just because individuals choose not to have them considered. Likewise, the third dimension of less visible domination via ideas, culture, and cognition can be shaped by decisions about what to teach, which rhetoric to use, and what symbols to value, but also by behind-the-back constraints of tradition, custom, and values, of the sort, say, that Louis Hartz ascribed to the liberal tradition in the United States as a pervasive yet invisible power.

Such theory, in the language of the philosopher Hugh Streeton, would offer “an organization of possibilities,” being “the sort of theory which leaves open the question whether people are doing what people would invariably do in these uniquely complicated circumstances, or are doing one of those comparatively few things which people . . . choose to do in such circumstances.” Such theory, could help empower us to probe a range of historical situations, including present challenges, with a set of analytical tools potentially capable of a fuller and more exacting capacity for diagnosis than either the behavioral tradition focusing on the agency aspects of the first, and sometimes the second, dimension of power, or more recent scholarship by political theorists that tends to be more inclined to understand power as structural constraint in Lukes’ third dimension.

Such theory might galvanize a very broad spectrum of colleagues in political science to engage in a project of great urgency: the task of understanding power in circumstances of perpetual fear. Work of this character would have to grapple with a deep lack of surety about the status quo, which, under such disorienting conditions, can lose its usual moral and practical advantage. It would have to deepen conceptions of reasoned choice to better distinguish acts of selecting from among commensurable alternatives based on preferences from deeper selections amongst more fundamental options, and better understand selections not governed exclusively by reason. It would demand richer conceptions of uncertainty, including deep uncertainty. It would have to think about how perpetual fear affects the continuum defined by the poles of structure and agency in each dimension of power. And it would not be able to shy away from analytical reflections on wrongs so extreme as to be evil.

**Staying Aloft**

In Chapel Hill, just across the hall from “Satan Leaving the Court of Chaos,” a recent temporary exhibit included one of Max Beerbohm’s literary caricatures, a lithograph executed in 1904 that depicts “Walt Whitman Inciting the Bird of Freedom to Soar.” Under current conditions, when disappointment and doubt overwhelm certainty, and when satanic unreason so manifestly is on the loose, it would be innocent to believe that political studies, however well-crafted, possess the capacity to help a Whitmanesque bird of freedom to climb ever higher. It also would be credulous to suppose that superior knowledge and good institutional design somehow can overcome perpetual fear. More modestly, we might wish to keep freedom in flight by developing the late Judith Shklar’s insight that realistic liberal theory must be concerned first not with abstract justice or quasi-utopian quests, but with cruelty, violence, and human superfluousness.

But such a “liberalism of fear” must not be disassociated from other forms of inquiry. We require more than political theory or intellectual histories of fear. To assess and affect future possibilities, we will need investigations of enlarged scope, working at levels from the intimate to the monumental, that can galvanize the full range of the discipline’s modes of study, including the practical tools we have acquired from philosophy and economics, sociology and history, mathematics and literary criticism. What we need is an effort to bring together, once again, hard-headed studies of stateness with the full range of scholarship on power, all the while motivated to probe how institutions and policies within the ambit of the liberal tradition might to help us find our way to a more decent politics and society under dangerous and difficult conditions.

Three and four decades ago, when so many of us in my generation decided to join the community of political scientists, we sensed inchoately that these were the urgent purposes of its institutional and ideational imagination; that the variety of ways the discipline develops concepts, builds theory, organizes empirical inquiry, and comprehends politics are bound tightly and critically to the best in the traditions of Enlightenment and modern liberalism. Then, as now, I keenly believe that we, as political scientists, have a responsibility to develop and use the vantage of ideas and instruments at our command to address the challenge put by Hannah Arendt in the summer of 1950 when she closed the preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. “We can no longer afford,” she wrote,

to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.
Notes
1 Milton 2005, Book II, line 629; II, 1054.
2 Ibid., II, 912–14.
3 Ibid., II, 910.
4 Ibid., II, 891–2.
5 Dallas 2005, 636.
6 For a view that stresses the much longer-term role fear has played in western political thought, emphasizing its repressive potential, see Robin 2004. By contrast, I wish to stress transformations to fear despite such continuities, writing in the spirit of Tony Judt’s observation that “the war changed everything,” and key features of the past now were “unrecoverable;” Judt 2005, 40.
8 Chakrabarty 2000, 19.
9 Roth 2004, 1.
11 Ibid., 378.
12 Ibid., 427.
13 Roth 2004, 7.
14 Kant 1991.
16 Judt 2005, 19–20. Estimates vary widely, rising to a total of some 60 million when the highest national calculations are aggregated.
17 Kolakowski 2005, 133.
18 Weinberg 1994, 3.
19 In terms of the 1941 typology of Hans Speier, the Second World War can be characterized as an example of “absolute war,” an “unrestricted and unregulated war . . . characterized, negatively, by the absence of any restrictions and regulations imposed upon violence, treachery, and frightfulness” (Speier 1941, 445). Not all observers thought the shift to civilian victimization to be morally more heinous than warfare conducted in more traditional ways. In a startling essay, for example, George Orwell observed in May 1944 that as “war is not avoidable at this stage of history, and since it has to happen it does not seem to me a bad thing that others should be killed besides young men” (Orwell 2002, 603). This essay in Tribune was a rejoinder to Vera Brittain’s pamphlet, Seed of Chaos, in which she had bravely condemned “obliteration” bombing for subjecting “thousands of helpless and innocent people in German, Italian, and German-occupied cities . . . to agonising forms of death and injury comparable to the worst tortures of the Middle Ages” (cited in Orwell 2002, 602).
20 Yeggart 1941.
22 Arendt 1951, 459.
24 Cited in Katzenelson 2003, 23.
26 Overy 2004.
29 Michnik 1997.
30 Stern 2005.
31 Gaddis 2002, 97.
32 Watkins 1934, 83.
33 Katznelson 2003, 159.
34 Mills 1956, 3, 5, 243, 4.
35 Ibid., 18.
36 Ibid., 7.
37 Ibid., 19.
38 Dahl 1961.
41 Coles 2002.
42 Lukes 2005, 11.
43 Ibid., 14; Gramsci 1971; Foucault 1980.
44 Mills 1956, 22.
45 Brogan 1956, 32.
46 Dahl 1958, 469, 463, 468.
49 Lasswell 1941, 455.
50 Ibid., 457–459, 464. Lasswell elaborated on these matters in a 1950 book, National Security and Individual Freedom, an effort to navigate a pathway during the Cold War between liberty and security, in which he assessed the implications of a permanent national security state and “the threat inherent” in what he now called “the garrison-police state” (Lasswell 1950, 23).
51 Brogan 1956, 25, 32, 2, 29.
52 Dahl 1953, 1–2, 6, 3, 4, 6. Dahl also expressed a view about decisions, power, and the policy process more generally, within the ambit of normal democratic politics and issues that anticipated how Mills soon was to discuss politics at the middle-range. Dahl wrote:

Once we get outside the models of the democratic theorists to the political life of the real world, we discover that politics which we in the West call democratic are in fact systems in which most policy is determined by a relatively small number of people. These people, leaders of one sort or another, act within ill-defined boundaries set by a general public—really a network of publics—that is passive and acquiescent except when its boundaries of tolerance are invaded, or at least when some leaders convince the public that this is so (Dahl 1953: 1).

53 Truman 1951, 524, 516.
54 Truman 1965, 866, 867–868, 871. David Truman was Dean of Columbia College when he wrote and
delivered this address. At the time, I was a member of the undergraduate Dean's Advisory Committee on Academic Affairs, and I still vividly recall how he discussed this talk with members of this group.

55 Crenson 1971; Gaventa 1980.
56 Mills 1956, 16, 20, 21, 23, 27.
58 Foucault 1980.
59 Lukes 2005, 57; emphasis original.
60 Nettl 1968.
62 Hartz 1955.
63 Stretton 1969, 327.
64 Blyth 2002, 8–11, 30–34.
65 Grant 2006.
68 Margalit 1996.
69 Arendt 1951, ix.

References


